



The
Violet Knight
Vol.2

Yohna

Illustration by Ako Tenma

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Yohna

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The Violet Knight

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Chapter 1

SUNLIGHT bathed the dense forest in its warm embrace. Rays of light danced between the branches onto the shrub-covered floor. Yuki squinted as she compared the sun's position to the map Vivi had given her. Studying the map with dazed eyes, she trudged forward on unsteady legs.

"Where...am I?"

Since Yuki had arrived in Aridol, she had only traveled by horse. Now she was stuck walking on her own two legs and she hadn't stopped for the past five days. Her legs trembled from overexertion and refused to move, and her muscles screamed in protest with intense pain.

"I'm...thirsty..."

Where's my bag? Can I even call this a bag?

Yuki had altered the strings on the jute bag Vivi had given her, so that she could wear it like a backpack. The bag contained a change of clothes, dried food, and a waterskin, although she had burned through most of her supplies during her first three days of wandering the forest.

With what little energy she could muster, she dragged herself to a large tree and sat with her back against its gnarled trunk. Being on edge day and night meant she could never truly rest.

How could she toss me out into a place like this? Yuki cursed Vivi's childish smirk. *I'm lost!*

Yuki had progressed through the forest by using oddly-shaped trees as landmarks and occasionally dropping something to mark her path. But no matter how far she walked, she found herself going in circles. She would stumble upon a new path, only to realize it led back to where she had been before, leaving her with the nagging sense that she wasn't making any progress in the first place.

Sunlight beat onto her black hair, the blistering heat melting her into a stupor. She closed her eyes. A gentle breeze caressed her sweat-soaked neck. With her eyes shut, she listened to the leaves swaying in the wind.

I wish it would at least rain...

Yuki's throat was so parched from thirst that even her tongue felt like it would dry out.

If I keep walking I'll eventually come across a watering hole, she thought.

If I keep walking, I'll eventually find someone.

If I keep walking, I'll eventually see the mountains.

If I keep walking, I'll eventually spot a town or village... maybe.

If I keep walking, I'll eventually, I'll eventually, I'll eventually, maybe...as long as I keep walking.

"...There's nothing out here!"

She had been naïve—about everything. Nobody was going to be nearby in this secluded forest, and yet those naïve thoughts propelled her onward. By the time she had regretted her path, it was already too late. Either way, she had no choice but to keep pushing forward. What else could she do? Turning back would only lead to the empty lot where Vivi's house once stood—if she could even find her way back.

Yuki's stomach gurgled. The waning sun signaled that she should stop for the day and rest at the tree she lay against. At night, every little noise seemed like it had come from the beasts and bugs she had glimpsed eyeing her from the shadows over the past few days. Was a predator stalking her, or were the creatures in the shadows just waiting for her to weaken enough to be an easy kill? Sleep only came to her while the sun was still up.

I had no idea bugs were nocturnal. Are bugs mostly nocturnal on Earth too? Or is that just another accursed feature of this world? Ugh, I can't take it anymore. I need a break.

Cuddling up against one of the gargantuan tree roots that surrounded her, she lowered her eyelids.

YUKI loved the smell of rain—the fresh, woody fragrance that arose when water suddenly hit the soil and freed the Earth’s dormant oils, releasing the musky scent associated with a first rain. She reveled in the moment the first drop hit the ground.

“Ouch!”

A piercing pain in the right side of her neck rudely disrupted her slumber. Sitting up in shock, she touched her neck only to feel something that shouldn’t be there.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” In a frenzy, she batted at whatever had latched onto her neck. A tiny bug flew away, escaping her wild attack.

I-It bit me? Yuki quickly stood, snatched up her bag, and fled from her spot at the base of the tree.

What should I do if a whole swarm attacks me? Her legs nearly buckled at the thought, but the bug merely darted away into the brush and showed no signs of buzzing after her with a nasty swarm. Her heart raced, pounding relentlessly against her ribcage. With both hands cupped protectively around her neck, she glared at the shrubbery the bug had fluttered off into.

What? No way?

Drip. Drip.

Cold droplets hit her cheeks. The fresh, musky scent she had thought was a dream brought forth real rain. Her throat cried in agony for a taste of the liquid she had gone too long without. Rain poured down on her as she stood rooted to the spot, her hands still guarding her neck.

How long had she slept? The skies that had remained clear since the day she left Vivi’s were covered in puffy, black clouds.

Rain...Rain! Rain! The stinging in the back of her throat reminded her of how desperately she longed for a drink with a jolt.

“**RAIN!**” Yuki shouted. She opened her mouth to the sky. Drop by drop, the rainwater trickled onto her tongue.

More. I need more! This might only be a quick drizzle.

Spurred on by the thought, Yuki glanced around the forest until she spotted a suitably large leaf. She plucked it from the tree and creased it lengthwise. Then, yanking the waterskin from her bag, she angled the leaf against its opening. Raindrops collected on the leaf's surface and flowed down into the waterskin. She secured the leaf with a small branch, then folded several smaller leaves into triangles to keep her contraption from falling over. Bringing another leaf to her mouth, she gulped down the water that had pooled on its surface.

"I'm revived!"

When she had repeated the process three more times, she gasped. Her waterskin had filled, yet the rain hadn't let up. Yuki swept her drenched bangs from her face.

"...Now that I think about it, I haven't bathed in ages!" Dark, puffy clouds filled the sky as far as the eye could see. "Perfect! I'll take a shower! A rain shower!"

Exhilaration filled her at the prospect of being clean. She carelessly tossed off her sandals, and let the rain-soaked dirt and vegetation gently suck her feet in.

Yuki frolicked around the forest, paying no heed to the mud splashing on her clothes. The cool rain rushing down her dirty skin and hair felt heavenly. Even though she was soaked from head to toe, she couldn't stop herself from laughing. When she stopped frolicking, she stood still under the downpour.

HOW long had she stayed sitting in the rain? Without noticing it, Yuki had sat down on a pile of mud with her legs sprawled out and her eyes shut. She only opened them because she heard a voice.

"...You're playing in the mud in a place like this? It may be warmer now, but you'll freeze if you stay like that, dearie," someone said in a deep, calm tenor.

Startled, Yuki stiffened and looked for the owner of the voice. A young man stood in the distance with an umbrella.

A man?

His long hair was a deep shade of forest-green, visible even in the distance.

His tall stature and toned build clashed with his beautiful face. It dawned on her that his left leg ended at the knee. As if a log had sprouted from his kneecap, a carved wooden stick served as a replacement for his missing shin. She inquisitively looked up at his face. Their gazes met. A sad smile upon his face, he walked in her direction.

“Your appearance isn’t too easy on the eyes either, my dear.”

Why not? Yuki assessed her appearance. Her thin shirt was soaked through, clinging haphazardly to her chest and exposing the contours of her small breasts.

“GEH!”

I-I have to h-h-hide my chest! I think I left my coat in my bag...

Yuki frantically looked left and right for the bag, her wet hair whipping against her cheeks. She had abandoned the bag on top of some nearby bushes.

F-Found it!

As she stepped toward her bag, the young man grabbed her. She peered up into the hazel eyes examining her in turn.

“You were bitten by a Buibui, weren’t you?”

“Huh?”

What’s a Buibui?

He lifted Yuki’s chin with his free hand, tilting it. She let him turn her head to the left. His eyes locked onto the right side of her neck.

“I knew it. Hey, are you feeling intoxicated—” He ended his question abruptly as he finished looking over her soaked and muddy figure. “Yeah, you most certainly are.”

He flashed a troubled smile.

What a pretty person, Yuki thought absently. Out of the blue, he bent down and bit her neck.

Chapter 2

YUKI used to watch Dracula as a child. Whenever Dracula sank his teeth into a gorgeous woman's neck, the woman's expression always filled with ecstasy. She had watched those intimate scenes with glee as a child. And now, when her turn came to experience what she had always admired?

"IT HUUUURTS!" All the hair on her body stood up as she felt something sucked out of her neck. "Yuuuck! Hey! Stop it!"

Sluurrrp. She clearly heard him suck something out of her.

Incapable of screaming, she flapped her lips. She struggled and squirmed, but the man's grip was strong and he wouldn't let go. Just how long did he suck on her neck for? It felt like ages before the lukewarm liquid pulled from her neck. He spat on the bushes, dyeing them partially red from whatever he had removed from her.

What's going on?

Yuki pressed her hands against her neck where she could still feel the heat of his lips. She peered up at him as he wiped his mouth on his white sleeve, smearing it with red.

"It might be too late, but I removed the poison anyway. You shouldn't wander around here, you know? This area is overflowing with Buibui."

What poison? It was a poisonous bug? And he just saved me?

"I'm sorry, I had no idea."

"For goodness' sake. Ignorance isn't an excuse, you know, dearie?" A sympathetic smile crossed his beautiful face, captivating Yuki. "After the elated state from the Buibui poison subsides, the victim suffers from a high fever—you'd better come to my house. I have medicine."

He lifted Yuki off the ground and hung her over his shoulder like a sack of

potatoes.

“Whoa! H-Hey! What’s the big idea?!”

“There are no other homes in this area. I’ll tend to you, so pipe down back there,” he commanded, picking up Yuki’s jute bag and strutting off with her dangling over his shoulder.

THIS was the second time Yuki found herself being carried like a sack of potatoes. The first time happened when hired thugs kidnapped her and lugged her to the inn where she bumped into Nasette who subsequently rescued her.

She resented her tiny body, incapable of doing anything to resist at the time. However, it now dawned on her that even a bigger body couldn’t do anything to get out of this predicament. She kicked and flailed, but the arms wrapped around her were like steel shackles.

“Good heavens. You have to stay still, sweetie,” he coaxed with mild exasperation.

“How can I? Explain, now!”

“When you’re hanging upside down?” His body trembled with stifled laughter. “I’ll be sure to explain everything to you once we get to my house, so don’t be scared... I guess that’s a difficult request under the circumstances.”

Why is this man so composed? Here I am panicking, embarrassed, and confused, when he’s as calm as he can be.

Yuki unconsciously bit her lower lip. She really wanted to cry, but her tears wouldn’t budge. Instead, her stomach gurgled and grumbled.

“...!” Shame and gravity made the blood go to her face. The young man chuckled again.

“You haven’t eaten anything, dear? In that case, I’ll have him whip you up something.” Ashamed, Yuki stayed quiet. “Oh dear, I forgot we were still fighting,” the young man commented to himself.

Yuki didn’t ask him who he was fighting with or who was going to cook. The rain had finally let up and the sun came out to cast its light on the sparkling, wet

leaves. She watched nature in awe as she bounced with the man's slow gait.

*“**AFTER** the elated state from the Buibui poison subsides the victim suffers from a high fever.”*

The young man had informed her when they first met.

My body feels heavy...

Yuki wasn't the one walking, but her body felt like an anchor sitting at the bottom of the ocean. If it wasn't just her imagination, she was breathing heavy too. Her head was spinning. Soaked hair and clothes clung to her, sucking away what little heat she had left.

Just how long am I going to stay like this?

Hanging upside down rendered her incapable of knowing where the young man was going and left her feeling as if a preposterous amount of time was passing. Her fear must have been conveyed to the young man, because he finally broke the silence.

“Are you all right? Are you feeling unwell?”

“Mm-mm...”

She honestly felt sick to her stomach, but she didn't have the energy to say it. Every step he took, her midriff banged against his shoulder and her head lolled. Blood rushed to her head and her temples throbbed.

“Oh dear, are you okay?”

Perhaps he found her lack of response alarming, because he pulled her off his shoulder and into his arms. Sitting upright sent the blood rushing down from her head. He nimbly put one arm under her legs and one behind her back to carry her in front of him like a bride over the threshold.

“I suppose I should have carried you this way from the start?” he asked in a gentle tenor.

“Huh? Ah...um...uh...” she sputtered incoherently and her eyes darted restlessly.

“I’m Rifaenotis. You can call me Rifae. What do you go by, dear?” he inquired with a smile.

“Y-Yuki.”

“I see.”

At a glimpse, he looked slender, but his chest was solid, and his arms bulged with well-defined muscle. Each of those manly body parts were pressed against her. Her waterlogged clothing splotched his dry clothes with wet spots.

“Yuki, dear, that’s my house over there.”

Yuki looked up. She followed Rifae’s gaze to a wooden cabin. He walked up to his house and skillfully opened the door with one hand.

“Rifae! You finally decided to show u—” an abrupt shout greeted them at the door. Standing in the doorway was a boy slightly younger than Yuki with distinctive red hair. He grimaced when his eyes met hers. “...Rifae, who’s that?”

“A guest. She was chomped on by a Buibui, so I’m going to tend to her. I’ll be borrowing your bed, Est.”

Rifae entered the house, paying no attention to the boy’s fuming. He headed straight down one of the hallways, his wooden leg thumping against the wood floors, and opened the first door on the left.

“I’m sorry, sweetie, I don’t have a guest room, so you have to bear with this one,” Rifae apologized and slowly laid her on the bed.

“Wait just a minute!” The boy named Est stood dauntingly in the doorway with his arms folded. “Why are you using my room?”

“Oh, yes, Est, please make her something easy to eat.” Rifae pulled a cloth out of a wooden dresser in the corner of the room and held it out to Yuki. “Yuki, use this to wipe yourself off. I’ll bring you a change of clothes, okay?”

Rifae brushed her wet bangs off her forehead and put the back of his hand to it. “You’ve got quite the fever. Do you have the chills, sweetie?”

Yuki nodded. He offered her another sympathetic smile.

“Rifae?” Est hadn’t moved from the doorway. “I’m still mad, y’know?”

Est glared at Yuki and turned on his heel. Rifae shrugged when he spotted her staring blankly after Est and went back to tending her.

Chapter 3

THE clothing Rifaenotis brought back for Yuki clearly belonged to someone several times her size. The large shirt he handed her easily slid over her head and to her knees like a short dress. It hid enough for her to lie in bed without revealing anything immodest.

Satisfied by seeing her lie down, Rifae left Est's room and came back a minute later with some clay tools. He moved a table and chair from the other side of the room to her bedside. He placed a mortar and some unfamiliar herbs on top of the table where he set about his work.

“.....”

Yuki lay on her side, silently watching him grind herbs. He began talking without looking at her. “I’m making your medicine, Yuki.”

“Medicine...?”

“Yup. You won’t die from a Buibui’s bite, but the poison will keep you in an elated state for a long time, and if it worsens you will become intoxicated by it. This leads to eventual addiction.”

Rifae added leaves and oddly shaped nuts to the mortar and started grinding. He got up in the middle of his work to go to another room and came back with a vial filled with an eerie liquid. He added the liquid to the mortar and grinded some more. Yuki absently watched him work. She was enduring an unrelenting headache that felt like hammers pounding against her skull.

“...Hey, Yuki, why were you in the middle of the forest?” his gentle voice echoed in her ears. When she couldn’t figure out what he meant by his question, he explained in more detail. “You see, not many people travel out here. Location-wise, it’s about dead center between the three countries’ borders. It’s about halfway up the mountain.”

Halfway up the mountain? Meaning I entered the mountain range without

realizing it? Makes sense why I never saw any mountains in front of me then.

“There are no villages or towns anywhere near here. Why were you in a place like this with such light equipment?”

Rifae took the paste he ground up in the mortar and smeared it on a leaf. He made Yuki roll over and pressed the leaf against her wounded neck. An electric current rushed through her neck the moment the paste made contact.

“...!” Yuki gasped.

“You have to endure the pain.”

She spotted something white out of the corner of her eye—a cloth bandage. Rifae deftly wrapped her neck and began on his next concoction.

“I have my doubts about you, but I’m also grateful,” Rifae admitted.

Grateful?

Yuki rolled back over to watch Rifae as he ground up berries. She found him very handsome with his pretty wavy hair. His eyes met hers when he felt her gaze.

“You see, I got into a tiff with Est.”

Yuki remembered how he mentioned being in a fight with someone when he was carrying her. Through her fevered daze, Rifae appeared somber and like someone from out of this world. Then again, she too was from another world.

“The fault lies with me, but still...secrets are a difficult matter.” Rifae gasped and glanced at Yuki as his hands went about their work. Her eyes met his intense gaze; he forced a doleful smile.

“Oh, dear me. Whatever am I saying? ...You have such mysterious eyes, Yuki. They make me feel like spilling my deepest secrets to you.” Rifae scrutinized her. “You remind me of someone I knew well.”

“.....”

His voice and expression filled with nostalgia. It almost sounded as if he had given up hope of ever seeing the person again and it killed him on the inside. Yuki felt as if she saw some deep part of him she shouldn’t have.

“Don’t get me wrong—the person you remind me of is a man,” Rifae said with a hopeless smile that took Yuki’s breath away. His smile was just too ephemeral.

YUKI had seen many different smiles since coming to Aridol. Tita’s smile was ladylike, while Luca’s feigned smiles were pretty in a way only something fake can be, like the smile painted on a glass doll. Rifaenotis’ smile was one filled with pain. Not that he himself was in pain, but rather it pained all those who witnessed it. Perhaps that’s what people call a heartrending smile.

The door was clumsily shoved open. A mouthwatering scent wafted into the room.

“Food’s ready.”

Yuki gulped. Her stomach howled, only now remembering its raving hunger. Saliva filled her mouth. Est came to the opposite side of the bed from Rifae and placed a tray of food on Yuki’s lap once she sat up.

“Be careful, it’s hot,” he warned curtly. Something resembling porridge let off steam on top of the tray.

“You...made this?”

Green dotted the whitish-brown porridge from the thinly chopped vegetables added to make the porridge more nutritious.

“You got a problem with that?”

Yuki looked up at Est in his oversized shirt and baggy pants. His expression bluntly bared his irritation.

“You’re amazing!”

“N-Not really! Just hurry up and eat before it cools down.”

Spurred on by his remark, Yuki put her hands together in prayer and picked up her spoon. Her stomach sought food to the point she felt it knotting. She scooped the soup and blew on it with all the air in her lungs. She blew on it several more times until she couldn’t wait anymore.

Hot! Her face twisted with pain from the searing heat, but she was more enraptured by the savory taste spreading across her tongue than the burning sensation. *It's so tasty...*

Scoop after scoop, she ate until even the spoon wasn't enough and she could only lick the bowl clean.

"You must've been quite hungry, dear..." Rifae said in awe as he watched her.

Yuki nodded several times.

"You want...another bowl?"

Yuki's eyes turned to Est like a hungry dog to a fresh slab of meat. Est showed the first signs of happiness since she met him—he was happy she enjoyed his food so much.

"I can have more?" She quickly gobbled down all the food leaving nothing behind. But her stomach still gurgled.

"Yeah, I don't mind. Rifae, why don't we take this chance to eat too?" Est asked Rifae with such awkwardness Yuki could sense their tension even though she just met them.

"S-Sure," Rifae agreed with a soft smile.

"Just wait. I'll bring the whole pot over," Est said and left the room.

Yuki watched him go as she scraped the corners of her bowl for any remaining morsel. Rifae smiled at the door Est left through.

I wonder if they made up.

Yuki thought they had a curious relationship.

Chapter 4

YUKI finally had eyes for other things once her hunger was satisfied. It took until she munched through her third serving for her to lower her head.

“Th-Thank you very much for the food and the change of clothes.”

Rifae and Est were taken aback by how abrupt her comment was.

“Pft, don’t mention it,” Rifae snickered. “Are you done eating? Drink this if you are.” He held out a wooden bowl full of whatever concoction he had just grounded and mixed together. “It’ll help reduce your fever.”

Yuki helplessly accepted it. *I hate medicine...and this isn’t even a pill or syrup... But I can’t turn it down after he went out of his way to make it for me.*

She prepared herself for the worst and tossed back the gooey liquid. She shoveled the remaining porridge into her mouth to get rid of the toe-curling, nauseatingly bitter taste.

“Wow...I’m surprised you downed that concoction.” Est grimaced.

Was I not supposed to drink it after all?

“Est was bitten by the Buibui before too. He’s hated this medication ever since,” Rifae chuckled.

“Wh-When was that?! ...Besides, why were you even near the Buibui?” Est shouted, forcing the focus of the conversation onto Yuki. While she thought his behavior was cute, she also sought worriedly on how to answer.

“U-Um...I don’t know how to explain.”

Rifae and Est trained their full attention on her.

What, and just how much, should I tell them? Just as I was about to be executed as the Legendary Witch, the real Legendary Witch saved me and abandoned me here... As if I could tell them that.

Yuki feebly shook her head. Rifae smiled thoughtfully, “Well, I have no intention of forcing you to answer.”

“It’s okay. I’ll tell you...”

It’s unfair to take advantage of their hospitality and not tell them anything about myself.

She mulled over how to explain. Rifae stopped eating to watch Yuki, but Est, who had brought it up in the first place, hungrily ate his porridge.

“I was traveling south to Adolunde and got lost on my way. I ran out of food and water as I wandered, and then—”

“Are you a moron? You sayin’ ‘at’s why you collapsed?” Est said through his mouthful of porridge.

“Est,” Rifae chided. Est shrugged. “And then you met me. Right, dear?”

Yuki nodded.

“...I see.”

“U-Um, I have a favor I would like to ask of you.”

I know asking for a favor is impudent, but I’m in a hurry.

“What is it, dearie?” Rifae asked with a soft smile that made Yuki nervous. His hair glittered in the sunlight streaming through the window.

“I know it is presumptuous of me to ask this of you after you not only saved me, but also tended to my wounds and fed me, but would you mind sharing some of your food with me?”

Rifae’s expression remained unchanged as if he knew she was going to ask that of him.

“I-I have to hurry.”

I want to hurry to where everyone is and apologize. I’m so worried and uneasy, my heart feels as if it’s being torn to pieces. I feel so helpless.

“Is your family in Adolunde?”

Yuki shook her head.

“Your boyfriend? Fiancé?”

She shook her head again.

“Then you have no reason to go.”

Yuki glowered at Est.

“Est.”

It's true Ain, Tita, Nasette, and Luca aren't my relatives. But to me they are...the ones who accepted me when I didn't know my right from left in this world. And they saved me many times.

“People important to me are there.” Yuki looked at Est and Rifae.

“...Do you remember how I told you ignorance is no excuse?” Rifae's face was incredibly beautiful, but his beauty masked his thoughts.

“I do.”

He told her that when she said she didn't know the Buibui were poisonous.

“It's up to you whether you go to Adolunde or not. But will you still want to go after learning the predicament Adolunde is facing right now?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

Rifae sighed like he was dealing with a particularly dimwitted child.

“Um... Oh, I know that a war started,” Yuki tossed in when he didn't answer her.

“That's not the problem, dear.”

“Then what is?”

“Adolunde isn't the only country in trouble. Right now the entire continent of Aridol is being ravaged by the spread of the Ten Day Fever. Everyone in the continent is preparing for the Ten Day Fever to hit them next.”

“Ten Day Fever?”

“It's a fever that will surely kill you within ten days of catching it. The few who have miraculously survived the ten days will never catch the fever again though.”

“Heh...”

“Adolunde is the most affected region with the most infected and highest death toll right now.”

“I see,” Yuki responded with a look as if she didn’t comprehend the scale of things.

“Yuki, have you had the Ten Day Fever before?”

“Nope. I’ve never caught that.”

“You might get infected if you go to Adolunde then. Do you still want to go?” Rifae asked, his voice gradually taking on a sterner tone. “You know, I’m no doctor, so I won’t stop you, dear. But I did go out of my way to treat you once already. Do you think I’ll happily send you off to the area the fever originated from?”

“But there’s no guarantee I’ll catch it, right?” Yuki countered.

“How naïve,” Rifae flatly declared. Yuki fell silent. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Est giving her a pitiful look.

“Yuki, do you know about the last time the Ten Day Fever swept through Aridol?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“The last case occurred about 150 years ago. Back then it started in Maruk and spread rapidly across Aridol. By the time it finished wreaking havoc across the three countries, Aridol’s overall population was reduced to a tenth of what it once was.”

“A tenth...” Yuki was rendered speechless. The Ten Day Fever sounded similar to what she knew about the spread of tuberculosis through Japan in the past. Goose bumps prickled across her skin.

“Adolunde’s prince died the other day from the Ten Day Fever,” Rifae added.

“Pardon?” Yuki’s eyes widened at the mention of Adolunde’s prince.

Is it Luca?

“Who? Hey, tell me which prince it was!” she asked in a frenzy, her languid

body the only thing keeping her from jumping out of bed to throttle him for an answer.

Shocked by her menacing look, Rifae fumbled over his words, “Huh? Uh, aaah, it’s the third prince—Prince Curtis.”

Yuki never heard of him before.

Thank goodness it’s not Luca.

Her momentary relief was shattered by Rifae’s matter-of-fact explanation. “A powerful country’s prince was infected and died after having the kingdom’s best doctors focusing all their energy on curing him. That is how dangerous the Ten Day Fever is, dear.”

“Even so—”

“I won’t stop you if you say you still want to go. I won’t be mean and not give you the supplies you asked for either. So please at least stay here quietly resting until your current fever goes away. And take this time to properly think about what you want to do,” Rifae said, standing to signal an end to the conversation. He slowly left the room, his wooden leg clacking unevenly against the wooden floor.

“Are the people you’re looking for that important to you?” Est asked, having long since finished his meal.

Yuki weakly nodded, her mind reeling in confusion over what she just learned. “Everyone should be in Adolunde.... I wonder if they’re all okay.”

Ain and Tita seem like they would have the weakest immunity. Are they okay? Did they even find their way back to Adolunde in one piece? I don’t even know if they did. I want to hurry up and see them.

“They *should* be? You don’t know?”

Yuki glared in irritation and vexation at Est as if he had just mocked her. “I don’t know!”

It’s not like...it’s not like I even have any clues!

She unconsciously squeezed her right hand’s middle finger. Adolunde’s prince—she hadn’t even known if it was Luca who had died.

I don't know anything without the ring.

"A Knight and their Master are connected. But you normally can't see it, so the ring was created as visible proof of the bonding for humans."

Vivi had told Yuki back in her cabin little more than a week ago.

I don't know...

Tears welled in her eyes.

"Hey! D-Don't cry! It'll look like I made you cry!" Est panicked.

"It doesn't just look like you made me cry; you did make me cry!" Yuki shot daggers of blame at him with her eyes.

"Aah, man, if you don't know, why don't you just ask Rifae?" Est suggested, his face still flustered.

"...?"

He scratched the back of his head and suddenly stood up to set about cleaning the dishes Rifae left on the table.

"The Information Broker Mage Rifaenotis. He's apparently pretty famous," he said proudly, a carefree smile touching his lips.

Chapter 5

INFORMATION Broker Mage Rifaenotis. Yuki wasn't sure what that meant. She racked her fever-fried brain for the answer and glanced at Est who forced a smile.

"Don't worry about it. Just sleep. Sleep and then think about it after you wake up."

He pushed her shoulder back until her head touched the pillow. Dropping his hands from her shoulder, he pulled the blanket crumpled in a heap at her stomach up to her chest and finished by patting her on the head.

I'm being treated like a child again.

Yuki held back her desire to tell him she was actually older than him, and obediently shut her eyes instead. She was so feverish she felt like crying. A cold chill battered her body into exhaustion. Her breath came out hot and she wondered if she was turning into a fire-breathing dragon.

I don't have the time to sleep. I have so many things I need to think about. Like how everyone is doing, what I'm going to do from here, where everyone is, how I'm going to find them, and what an information broker is. I need to think about who Rifaenotis is. Is Luca healthy? Is Ain safe? Where did Vivi go? The Ten Day Fever. My own fever. The Buibui.

The fever turned her thoughts delirious until her mind fell into the embrace of Morpheus.

THERE are times when you can wake up fully refreshed and feeling great. Such perfect rest comes out of nowhere, surprising those blessed by it. Yuki often felt as if she lost something whenever she woke up several hours earlier than she needed to. But the refreshing, early-morning air told her she gained something as well.

For the first time in a long while Yuki woke up feeling refreshed. Her mind quickly became alert and she opened her eyes.

“...It’s dark.”

Her eyes were open, but the room was pitch-black.

What time is it? How long have I been asleep?

She sat up in bed, her sweat-soaked shirt clinging to her skin with the movement—she sweated out the fever while she slept. Something slid from her head and plopped onto her hand. She touched it and dangled it right in front of her eyes until she could tell it was a wet cloth.

Who put this on me?

The faces of the cabin’s residents crossed her mind. Was it Rifae who gently smiled at her? Or did Est do it despite the rude attitude he took toward her? Either way, she knew she had to thank them.

I feel amazingly refreshed. I felt so sick several hours ago and now my mind has completely cleared.

Yuki began pondering all the things that had made little sense to her during the feverish haze.

AFTER mulling over her friends’ well-being and her own circumstances, Yuki found herself standing in front of a door with faint light seeping between the cracks into the hallway. The door was located at the deepest part of Rifae’s house at the end of the hallway. She knocked softly on the knobby wooden door.

“Come in.”

She slowly opened the door. Rifae sat inside the room in front of a large crystal. Someone’s reflection whirled in the crystal, but the image vanished in an instant. The brief moment she glimpsed the shadowy figure gave her a strange feeling she couldn’t put her finger on.

“Ah, do you have some time for me right now?” she asked.

“Sure, dear,” Rifae said and moved a chair from a corner of the room into the center for her.

The windowless room was much smaller than the room Yuki slept in. Furthermore, every other space in the room, aside from the table the crystal sat on and the two chairs, was covered from floor to ceiling with filled shelves. This must have been the room Rifae kept going to for ingredients while preparing Yuki’s medicine—an innumerable amount of vials, herbs, and tools lined the wooden shelves.

“Are you feeling better now?” Rifae asked, concern lacing his tone.

“Yes, thanks to the medicine you made me, Rifaenotis,” Yuki replied with a grin.

“Hehe, you’re a skilled flatterer, sweetie.” Rifae asked, “So? What is it that you need?”

“...Well, I’ve been thinking things over.” Yuki looked at Rifae where he sat on the other side of the table. “You told me that ignorance isn’t an excuse, right?”

“I did.”

“I couldn’t say anything back when you said that to me.”

“You don’t know anything.”

Many people had pointed out Yuki’s ignorance since she arrived in Aridol.

And yet I’ve only continued to complain and fret about not knowing anything. I know nothing about this world or the people who live in it. There’s just so much I don’t know, I can’t even guess what’s going on. In that case...

“So, Information Broker Rifaenotis, please provide me with information.”

Rifae’s calm eyes wavered for a moment. “...Est told you.”

Yuki nodded. He examined Yuki’s face for a period of time before sighing as if he gave in.

“Good heavens...this is why children are problematic. You’re all so earnest and set in your ways,” he commented with a soft and slightly playful smile before his expression shifted instantly to a serious businessman. “Very well.

However, I expect information in return for payment.”

Yuki paused for a moment.

Information? I don't have any valuable information.

She bit her lower lip. “Fine. If there is something I can tell you.”

Rifae flashed her a magnificent smile. “We have a deal then. So, dear, what is it you want to know?”

“Umm...” Yuki went through the information she mentally organized earlier. “What is the state of the war between Adolunde and Maruk right now?”

“Where should I start?”

Does he mean his fee will skyrocket based on how much information I ask for? Is he going to rip me off?

Yuki glared at him with accusing eyes. He returned her glare with an unreadable expression and beautiful smile.

“From beginning to end!”

“Someone’s rich with information.” Rifae grinned. “Until just the other day, Maruk’s Western Border was a battlefield between Maruk and Adolunde’s prisoners of war from Rvydom. The battle ended in a standstill when some unknown person took command a few days ago. Not long afterward the frontlines of the war all but vanished.”

Rvydom’s people stopped killing each other? Orga mentioned forcing Rvydom’s prisoners of war to kill each other. But I had no idea the battle stopped.

“And the Legendary Witch was executed in Maruk just the other day.”

Yuki was startled by him bringing up the execution, but she feigned indifference.

“Adolunde was under the suspicion that the Witch was actually Rvydom’s princess and sent reinforcements out to aid her—under the orders of Adolunde’s first prince—Prince Orga.”

“Orga...” she growled with disgust.

There wasn't a day Yuki didn't remember his hate-filled eyes as he burned her flesh with the branding iron like cattle. She had to stop herself from shivering with disgust at his name. Her nails dug crescents into her palms to keep the bile down as she recalled the acrid scent of her seared flesh.

"And directly after he sent reinforcements to the frontlines, Prince Curtis collapsed with a fever as if it were all some conspiracy. Before long, fear of the Ten Day Fever spread throughout the land and the war became the least of everyone's worries. Adolunde's reinforcements should be on standby at the Eastern Border if they aren't already dying from the fever."

Adolunde's army is on standby... Yuki pondered Rifae's information. *In other words, the armies aren't slaughtering each other yet.*

"...Do you know anything else?" Rifae's expression still held that unreadable smile. Yuki took his lack of answer as a sign she had to ask specific questions. "Um, about the Ten Day Fever you keep mentioning...are there any preventive measures people can take to keep from catching it?"

Chapter 6

“**THE** Ten Day Fever is a deadly illness that spread across Aridol 150 years ago. The illness was named as such because whoever caught it died within ten days. Those who miraculously survived were eventually held to the superstition they’ll never again suffer from illness, and their constitution was henceforth called the *Witch’s Blessing*,” Rifae explained.

“Despite over 150 years’ worth of research, there’s still no effective cure or treatment for it. Further research is near impossible since the destruction of the only research facility in Rvydom, leaving people to forever live in fear of the fever. Not knowing how to treat it also means we have no idea how to prevent catching it,” he finished.

“...I see,” Yuki said dolefully.

“Do you honestly intend to go to Adolunde, dear?”

“Yes.”

“...How stubborn you are.”

“You like to stick your nose into other people’s lives, don’t you?” Yuki laughed.

Rifae was taken aback by her claim. A few seconds passed before a gentle smile replaced his shock. “Well, of course. It’s been five years since I’ve had a guest here who isn’t related to my work.”

“Five years? It’s been that long?”

“Yes. The guest then was a boy tinier than you, Yuki. He called me a pervert, a womanly-man, and all sorts of insults,” Rifae chuckled as he remembered the past. “He’s really grown.”

He’s grown? Meaning it’s someone who’s still around.

Yuki knew of only one person who fit. “Wait, do you mean Est?”

“Indeed. I took him in since he had no relatives, and he ended up settling down here.”

“He settled here? What about your family, Rifae? What did they think of that?” Yuki regretted the words the moment they were out her mouth.

This world has been plagued by war after war for years. It's probably natural for most people not to have family anymore.

Rifae watched Yuki curiously as she twisted in her seat uncomfortably. “Did you possibly hear something from Est?” he chuckled again.

“Huh? I didn’t.” She shook her head. “I only heard you’re a famous Information Broker.”

“I see... You see, I had a mother.”

Had a mother? If he's speaking in past tense—

“She died a long time ago, my dear.”

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

Rifae smiled. “No need for you to apologize. Considering Mother’s age, it was inevitable.”

Her age? I wonder if she gave birth to him at an old age.

Yuki’s parents had her when they were fairly young. She wanted to change the topic to avoid digging up old wounds.

“Say, Yuki, do you know about Witches?”

“Hm? Yeah, to a certain degree.”

“You see, dear, I was raised by a Witch.”

“What?”

He was raised by a Witch?

“I’m the son of a Witch.”

“Wait, I heard that when a Witch gives birth to a son she—”

“Yes, it’s customary for her to leave the son behind. But Mother took me with her to this cabin.”

Yuki wasn't sure if that was a common practice or not. Rifae easily saw through what she was thinking and answered her doubts. "I was an exception to the rule. I've never heard of any other sons being raised by their Witch mother. You see, it seems my mother had lived for more than 500 years. She gave birth to two children in all those years. Both her children were born male."

Rifae's gaze dropped to his hands. "Mother said when she was pregnant with her third child she thought it was her last chance at a girl. And then she gave birth to another boy."

He chuckled. "My dear mother said she always wanted to try raising a child. Because all she could do until now was watch them from a distance. And so I ended up living my entire life in this abode with Mother. I was quite the perfect child, you know?"

He must have truly loved his mother. He seems so happy talking about the past with her.

"Did you know that a Witch's son has the latent talent to be a Mage, Yuki?"

"They do?"

"To the extent it is said that all the renowned Mages recorded throughout history were actually a Witch's son. At the very least, being a Witch's child does seem to have an effect on the child's abilities."

"Heh," Yuki hummed in awe.

Rifae happily went on, "I was also strictly raised by Mother to be a skilled Mage. She taught me many things, such as recipes and methods of combining medicines only a Witch would know. She was strict about it, but learning was fun. It truly was fun," he repeated, reveling in the memory.

"But Mother died from old age when I was ten. I thought Witches were immortal, but she suddenly died in her sleep."

"...So what did you do after that?"

"Mother previously told me to attend a boarding school for Mages in Rvydom. So I went there."

Yuki tried imagining what Rifae looked like as a ten-year-old attending school

without any support or backing from parents.

“Attending the boarding school was an onslaught of firsts for me. I had no idea I spoke funny, and it was my first time interacting with anyone other than Mother.”

“Were you teased?”

“I wasn’t. I was the top of my class and superior to my classmates thanks to being taught by a Witch. Plus, I may have a pretty face, but I’m physically strong. My master was chosen for me before graduation.”

“Heh.”

“Normally, a Mage graduates then does further training before being assigned to a master,” Rifae said, excitement in his voice.

“Who were you assigned to?”

“Rvydom’s king.” The expression vanished from his face.

Rvydom’s king? Didn’t he go missing?

“Oh dear, why am I spilling my guts to you? You’re a good listener, Yuki.” He forced a clearly self-derisive smile and stood. “It’s already late. I should sleep soon...”

“Rifae...”

“You just got over a fever, so you best get off to sleep as well, dear.” He quickly cleaned off his desk.

You don’t have to blatantly hide it. He must not want to be asked about it. I won’t force him to tell me if he wants to hide it so badly.

Yuki stood to leave when she suddenly remembered the condition Rifae had set for giving her information. “Oh, wait. I haven’t told you anything yet, Rifae.”

“No need for that, dear. It’s not like I told you any big secrets. Half of what I talked about was my own past.”

“But...” Yuki felt as if he were going easy on her.

“If you promise to keep quiet about my past, I’ll help search for a clue on how to find who you’re looking for tomorrow,” Rifae said carefully, contrary to his

prior talkativeness.

Yuki's eyes rounded. Was the person she sought currently in the center of the maelstrom where the Ten Day Fever was at its worst?

Why didn't I think about that?! I'm such an idiot!

She clenched her fists. Just asking him made her a nervous wreck. "Rifae! U-Um, you said Adolunde's third prince caught the Ten Day Fever, right?"

"Yes, I did."

"Are the other princes all right?"

"Yes. The first prince seems fine and the second prince is living in a sanctuary to the west, so I suppose he is unaffected. The youngest twins also appear to be safe."

What about the prince between them?

Rifae bent down to pick something up and stopped moving.

"The fourth prince...well, I guess I haven't heard any news about him having caught the Ten Day Fever."

"...That makes it sound like he's facing some other problem aside from the fever."

"Yuki, what's wrong, sweetie? Prince Lucat has nothing to do with you, right? Ah, are you possibly one of his fans?"

"I am not," she flatly denied and stared at Rifae who was clearly hiding something.

"Information on him is classified so I won't tell you."

"Tell me!"

Classified? Did Luca do something?

Yuki walked over to Rifae and cornered him. His eyes widened at her threatening look.

"This information comes at a high price."

"Does that mean you will tell me if I can give you some sort of equal

information in exchange?”

Rifae smiled.

What information do I have? What do I know that no one else does? The fact I have violet eyes? That won't be convincing with how I currently look under Vivi's magic. Is there anything? Anything at all?

Yuki frantically racked her brain. Sensing something from how desperate she appeared, Rifae sat back in his chair. The gentle smile vanished from his face to be replaced with the stern, unreadable countenance of an information broker.

I have to remember something on the same level as a classified secret. She unknowingly gripped her right ring finger and rubbed the area the violet ring once adorned.

“A Knight and their Master are connected.” Vivi's amused expression flashed in the back of Yuki's mind. She implied she wanted to meet Luca.

“Ah! That's right! Vivi!”

It suddenly hit her. The Legendary Witch who was supposedly executed was currently living healthily somewhere in this world. Was Rifae aware of that?

It may not be something I should share. Someone else may get this information out of Rifae just like I'm doing right now. But...

Yuki fretted over her decision for a while before looking up at Rifae who still watched her with his stern, calculated expression. She slowly opened her mouth, “About the Legendary Witch who was executed...”

“...Yes? You have information on her?” Yuki nodded. “Not even her name is known to the public. I am also lacking information on her.”

Her name...was really long. Why does everyone in this world have such long and difficult to remember names? Remember! Remember!

“Her name is Vizui Vil Dividum. I don't know her age. She has dark-gray hair and red-tinged violet eyes. Her appearance is that of a ten-year-old girl...”

Rifae watched Yuki in silence.

I'm sorry, Vivi.

“It wasn’t her who they executed in Maruk. Maybe it’s wrong to say it wasn’t her, but it also wasn’t Rvydom’s princess. At any rate, the Legendary Witch still lives.”

“...What do you mean?”

“They almost executed a normal girl, um...but it seems like the Legendary Witch was unhappy they were going to say it was her they executed so she saved the girl. But that would ruin Maruk’s honor so they announced they did execute the Witch,” Yuki fumbled over her words in an incoherent explanation.

Rifae curled a long hair around his finger as he silently assessed her. After a long pause and dragged out sigh, he said, “...From the moment I saw you, I thought you must have had some sort of unusual reason for being out here, but it never occurred to me that you’re connected to the Legendary Witch and Prince Lucat.”

I fell into his trap again.

By telling Rifae that information, she voluntarily shared her connection to Luca and Vivi. With how smart Rifae was, he likely put two and two together to discover she was the girl saved by the Witch too. Yuki glared at him. He chuckled merrily.

He continued curling his hair around his finger as he said, “Prince Lucat is currently under suspicion for having bonded with a Witch. They say he bonded with a Witch and attempted to overthrow Prince Orga in his position as first in line to succeed the throne.”

He bonded with a Witch? Is that because of the incident in Fol when I pretended to be the Witch? But Luca didn’t seem interested in becoming king...

“The funny thing is that Prince Lucat claims he bonded with Rvydom’s princess as his Master. It sounds like nothing less than a lie to save himself, and Adolunde’s nobles are quibbling amongst themselves about the absurdity of it. Some think the prince has lost his mind; others believe it’s a mere excuse, while some wonder whether he’s telling the truth.

“In the end, they are even considering the fact Rvydom’s princess may have been a Witch. The nobles have to be mindful of their own positions too, so

Prince Lucat is being imprisoned for the time being until they come to a deliberation.”

Rvydom’s princess...that’s a story Orga came up with to further his schemes.

“How could they believe such lies?”

Who do those nobles think they are? Do they all have a few screws loose?

“They don’t know anything about anything,” Yuki muttered, clenching her right hand over the invisible burn marks on her chest.

“That’s what it means not to know. Ignorance is not an excuse. They don’t even believe they are ignorant in the first place. Nobles delude themselves into believing they control their country,” Rifae drawled, his expression alluding to a part of him having given up on something long ago.

Chapter 7

SPEAKING with Rifae made Yuki painfully aware of just how little she knew.

I'm naïve in my plans and thinking too. She rolled over in bed.

"It's very late, so sleep for now," Rifae had said, chasing her out of his room.

She returned to the room they provided her with and flopped back into bed, but her prior refreshing sleep hindered her from getting another minute of rest. Absently, she scanned the room with eyes long-accustomed to the dark. Faint light trickled in through the window. Sick of lying in bed when she wasn't tired, Yuki got up and walked over to the window. Through it, she saw a boat-shaped moon floating in the night sky.

A lot of time has gone by since the new moon... The days passed by in a hectic and confusing blur. *How many days has it been since I came to this world? I haven't had the leisure or time to count. So much has happened.*

The days she spent in Aridol weren't as numerous as the stars, but they were full of adventure, fun, and pain. The seal burned into her flesh agonized her to such a degree she wished they would kill her instead. Never did she fathom experiencing a pain that would make her rather die than live through it. She placed a hand on her hideously burned chest, the pain as vivid to her now as it had been when the hot iron pressed against her. The teenage body Vivi crafted for her didn't have any such wounds marring its perfect skin.

"When it comes down to it, that body is a fake," Vivi had told Yuki. *"The real you is still a kiddie. Even if you appear a little bigger physically."*

Yuki didn't understand what she meant at the time.

But I think I have a better understanding now. I'm living peacefully right now because I've been blessed by meeting good person after person since arriving in this world. I've always been grateful for what I've been blessed with, but I know my gratitude will never be enough. Still, ignorance is no excuse, which is why I

need to do what I can.

But what can I do? Can I save Luca? How can I break into Adolunde Castle's dungeon? Yuki was agitated by the lack of knowledge that prevented her from even figuring out how to save Luca. I should try to regroup with Ain and the others first. I'm certain he's already met up with Tita and the others.

"Everyone will recognize me even though I look like this, right?" she muttered, remembering Vivi's curse.

She crawled back into bed, but morning came without sleep. Footsteps echoed in the hallway in the faint light of dawn break. Yuki slowly got out of bed.

Someone's walking around at this time?

She quietly opened the door and peered into the hallway. The footsteps entered the living room and slipped out the front door.

"....."

Curiosity replaced the boredom caused by sleeplessness.

I want to thank them for yesterday. If there's something I can do to help I want to do it, Yuki made that excuse to herself and snuck outside.

Sunlight smacked her in the face when she opened the door. Squinting against the brightness, she rubbed her hands together to counter the chill of early morning caressing her cheeks and fingers. She took a deep breath, inhaling the pleasant forest air and exhaled. The cool air refreshed her fatigued mind and body.

"Oh? You're up?"

Yuki forced her eyes to open against the bright sunlight. Hooding her eyes with her hand to block out the sun, she spotted Est standing there with a bucket.

"Feeling better?"

"Yes, thanks to you guys. You're the one who placed that wet cloth on my forehead, right?" Est turned his face away. "Thanks."

“N-No problem...”

Yuki couldn't help but giggle. “Where are you going?”

“Morning work,” he replied with a broad grin and a languid tone. “Just kidding. A lot of things need to be done before I make breakfast.”

“I see...”

From the casual way he speaks about it, it sounds like he's the one who always makes breakfast.

“...Wanna come?”

“I'll go! Ehehe!” She giggled and lined up beside Est.

“...Just so you know, there's nothing fun about what I do,” he remarked dubiously. She laughed again at the way he sheepishly tried to dissuade her.

EST went to a nearby well and washed his faced. Yuki followed suit and washed her face too. Then he filled the bucket he was carrying with water and walked a little ways to a small field where he sprinkled water on the crops. He picked some different fruits and vegetables from the field, set them aside, and removed the weeds.

Next, he went inside a small wooden shed. Two small birds lived inside. Est took the eggs they laid and gave them food. Once he was finished with all that, he returned to the well to wash the fruits and vegetables.

Along the way, Est and Yuki talked about all sorts of things. She learned his full name was Estrasant Lineau, and he was one year younger than her real age, making him seventeen. He didn't hide his shock when she informed him she was older and he told her to stop being formal with him.

Est told her he was taken in by Rifaenotis when he was twelve and had lived with him ever since. When he first started living with Rifae, he told Est about a nearby orphanage and suggested he live there instead, but Rifae's house was frighteningly messy and he rarely ate a proper meal, so Est stubbornly stayed with him.

Est was put in charge of making food and household chores ever since.

“Rifae can only reduce food to charcoals,” he said with resignation. His tone and attitude hinted he didn’t really mind.

“You guys are close, huh?” Yuki pointed out with a grin as she helped Est prepare breakfast.

Est, looking surprisingly dashing in an apron, skillfully chopped vegetables at a quick speed. Yuki tore the leafy vegetables into bite-sized pieces beside him. Behind them was a sunken hearth where a fire pit was dug out and a wire netting sat on top of it to cook on. A pot filled with porridge simmered on top of the wire.

“Well, we should be after living together for five years,” Est retorted. Neither of them stopped working as they chatted.

“Then you’re like family now.”

“Yeah, he’s a real troublesome family member,” he laughed.

Simmering porridge and rhythmic chopping made for the most peaceful noises Yuki had heard in a long time.

Chapter 8

YUKI and Est finished cooking a delicious breakfast and carried the meal to the dining table in the living area. The sun sat high in the sky, bathing the house in warm sunlight.

“...Rifae hasn’t woken up yet, huh?” Yuki remarked.

“Rifae isn’t a morning person. Anyway, can you fill this bucket with water from the well I showed you earlier?” Est asked, disappearing down the hallway.

Yuki did as he asked and came back from the well with a bucket of water, but Est and Rifae weren’t around. She had nothing to do, so she dug through the wood cabinets and pulled out three glasses. Once she had them, she organized the dishes on the table. She really had nothing left to do after that.

Aren’t they being a little too trusting of me?

She hadn’t told them anything about herself. Rifaenotis likely guessed she was connected to Luca and Vivi, but Est didn’t know that.

Aren’t I pretty fishy being acquainted with Luca and Vivi? One is a prince imprisoned for suspected treason and the other is the so-called Legendary Witch. Just hearing that sounds amazing... Imprisoned...

Yuki’s heart dropped.

He’s not being tortured, right? I mean, he may be twisted, but he’s still a prince. I want to believe he isn’t being treated cruelly at least. If not, I don’t think my heart can endure. Honestly, enjoying a good breakfast bathed in the warm sunlight surrounded by good people is a waste of time. I need to hurry to Adolunde.

I’m sure this must be the way the people in this world live when they’re not at war.

“C’mon, she’s your guest, right? What’re you doin’ making her wait?” Est’s

voice echoed down the hall. Yuki opened her eyes. She glanced at the door at the end of the hall—her jaw dropped.

“...Is Rifae okay?”

Rifae laid collapsed on Est’s back, his arms dangling limply over Est’s shoulders. Est clasped Rifae’s hands to his chest and dragged him. Being twice Est’s size, Rifae’s wooden leg thumped precariously against the floorboards.

“This always happens.”

Yuki quickly stood and pulled out a chair for Rifae.

“Thanks.” Est nimbly walked around the chair and flopped Rifae onto it. “Can you get me some water?”

“Ah, sure.” Yuki poured water from the pitcher into a glass. Est forced the glass into Rifae’s hand.

“Here. Don’t break it.”

Break it?

The set of matching glasses were sculpted from hard clay and looked sturdy enough. Rifae’s hair looked like a rat’s nest. The hair at the back of his head curled up in different directions, knotting at the bottom. Where did his finely groomed, wavy hair go?

“Mn...” Rifae’s right hand sluggishly moved with the cup. Yuki cautiously watched as the cup shook in his hand, but it made it to his mouth without any issue. He guzzled down the water and placed the cup on the table. Est sat next to Yuki, across from Rifae, and started eating.

“I-Is he okay?” she asked. Rifae didn’t seem awake yet. She looked over at Est who pointed at Rifae with his spoon. She followed his gaze—Rifae sluggishly moved his own spoon like the sloth she once saw in a zoo.

“Oh...”

“Rifae is bad with mornings.”

I’m not sure if you can just call this being bad with mornings...

“He’ll wake up as he eats.”

“Huh...” Yuki decided to just accept Est’s reasoning and pick up her own spoon. “Thanks for the food.”

She glanced over at Est who ate in silence. Rifae appeared like a mature adult until now, but his current state bewildered her.

I-It’s kinda hard to say I’m leaving right now...

Yuki decided to eat in silence, but Est broke the silence out of consideration for her. “When I first came to this house...”

“What?”

“It was a pigsty.”

“A...pigsty?”

What does he mean?

Their eyes met. She blinked several times. Est’s stunning gray eyes glinted with a frostiness not there before. “Did you hear about the time Rifae picked me up?”

“Ah, yeah. A little bit from Rifae last night...”

“I see. He found me in the dead of night. He discovered me during a night walk and brought me back to this house. He pulled me through the pitch-black hallway to a bed and let me sleep there.” Est stared expressionlessly at the porridge-filled bowl. “My only skill at the time was cooking, so the next morning I thought I could make him breakfast as thanks for letting me stay the night.”

“...I see.”

“And when I tried—this room was a pigsty.”

Yuki took advantage of Est’s current talkativeness to ask a follow-up question. “...What do you mean?”

“What other meaning can it have? Let’s just say it was so filthy you’d think pigs lived here. I couldn’t even walk into the kitchen!”

“What? Why not?”

“He was conducting experiments with fire in the kitchen and didn’t clean them up, so things kept piling up. It piled up so high it became a mountain of

random stuff. He said he didn't want it to all fall down if he touched it, so he left it that way and just let it continue growing."

"...That sounds like..."

A hoarder?

Yuki laughed dryly when she recalled the special TV news report she watched on hoarders. "Hahahaha!"

Either he was unhappy she laughed, or he just wanted someone to rant to, because Est rattled on, "I'm telling you it's no laughing matter. It wasn't just the kitchen. Even this living room was a nightmare! It was covered in a foot of dust and mold grew everywhere. It was to the point a normal person definitely woulda gotten sick."

"Now that's hard to imagine..." She stole a peek at Rifae slowly munching on his porridge. His bangs hung sloppily over his face, hiding his expression.

"Just when I thought he made food, it was charcoal. I'm surprised he's lived for thirty years like this."

"Whaat?! Wait. Who's thirty?"

"Rifae. He was thirty when he took me in, so he'll be thirty-five this year."

"Don't talk about my age..." strained a hoarse voice. Surprised, Yuki looked across the table.

"It's the truth."

"I appear younger than my age, so lay off it," a still sleepy, but clearly awake Rifae answered. He swept his bangs off his face with his left hand, revealing bags under his eyes.

"G-Good morning," Yuki abruptly greeted, unsure of what else to say.

"Morning, dear," Rifae answered with a beauteous grin. If not for his medusa-like hair, his smile would have been one of the most beautiful she had ever seen.

Chapter 9

ONCE Rifaenotis woke up, he became incredibly talkative, distracting Yuki from his previous zombie-like state. They chatted about various topics as they gradually devoured the food on the table.

“So? Why are there bags under your eyes?” Est asked, pointing at Rifae’s face.

“Ah, that’s because I talked to him late—”

“You know about my nocturnal habits,” Rifae said over Yuki. Catching her glance, he winked at her.

“You’re getting on in age, so you need to quit staying up late and go to bed early!”

“I told you not to mention my age. I wouldn’t have bags under my eyes and have skin issues if you let me sleep in past noon, Est.”

“You’ll start to mold if you don’t get out in the sun more.”

“Mold doesn’t grow on people,” Rifae pouted. Silence suddenly filled the room.

“You were probably just wasting your time looking for someone again anyway.”

“.....”

Yuki felt left out by the abrupt silence.

He’s looking for someone? She recalled the shadowy figure reflected in the crystal sitting on top of Rifae’s table last night. *Was that the person he’s looking for? But what’s with the awkwardness between them?*

Sparks seemed to fly in the silence—sparks sent by Est. Rifaenotis kept eating as if nothing happened.

“Est, we have a guest over right now.”

“...I’m still mad, you know?”

The words Yuki heard when she first arrived at Rifae’s house had her look at Est. Noticing her eyes on him, he cringed and forced the rest of his food into his mouth and shoved from the table.

“...You can leave the dishes on the table,” he said to Yuki, walking to the front door.

“Est.”

“I’m going to go cool my head.” Est grabbed a toolbox near the door and left.

Yuki and Rifae stared at the door after it shut. Rifae’s sigh finally broke their silence and lightened the mood.

“Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be.”

Were they fighting about Rifae looking for someone?

“He’s at a difficult age.”

“What?”

Rifae examined Yuki with scrutinizing eyes, “Are you younger than Est?”

“No, I’m a year older.”

“Is that so?” Rifae’s calming expression reminded Yuki of someone.

His smile is similar to Papa’s. Yuki’s father—the kind man who chucked her from the balcony of their condo on the fourteenth floor. Oh yeah, he’s thirty-five so he’s close in age to Papa... But maybe the two-year difference between them makes this much of a difference in personality.

Yuki glanced at Rifae silently eating his porridge.

“What caused your fight in the first place?”

His head jerked up.

Ah, that might have been rude to ask.

She only realized she was prying once the words were out her mouth. She cursed herself and looked at Rifae. A doleful smile touched his lips.

“You know what? I don’t really know why either.”

“You don’t know?”

“As Est mentioned, I’m searching for a certain person. And then Est suddenly asked me who they are.”

“I see.”

“He got mad when I said I can’t tell him who... I’m honestly not sure what to do,” he confessed.

Rifae had every right to be angry at Est for getting mad at him for no reason, but Yuki thought it was probably either his personality or age keeping him from snapping back.

“I never once thought I was looking,” Rifae muttered and shook his head. “I think I didn’t want to use the words searching or looking.”

I don’t get it.

Rifae chuckled, seeing through her confusion. “Saying I’m looking for them acknowledges they are no longer around. You look for someone when you can’t find them—when they are gone. But I just didn’t want to accept the fact that person isn’t here anymore. Even now...I hate acknowledging they aren’t here.”

...What a forlorn smile.

Rifae had put a lid on what he didn’t want to accept. Despite knowing he merely put a lid over the truth, he avoided facing it. It was inevitable to want to avoid facing something that hurt.

But something doesn’t seem right here. I understand if Est had told him to face reality. But he didn’t seem angry over the fact Rifae is wasting his time looking for someone.

Yuki had only spoken in-depth with Est for the first time that morning, but she gleaned his kindness from how he treated her the past two days. He nagged Rifae over small things, but still looked after him. The days they spent together over the past five years must have always been that way.

They lived a peaceful life together. Rifae admitted they rarely got involved with the outside world. This was an isolated world made up of just the two of

them. Inside that small world, Rifae was consumed by his painful past memories. Yuki caught onto his deep pain immediately and easily—there was no way Est hadn't.

...Is he jealous? Yuki's heart ached.

"Oh, dear me, I rattled on about something weird again. You truly are a strange girl, Yuki." Rifae finished off his cup of water.

"...It's probably, and I mean probably?" Yuki started, earnestly looking at Rifae. The smile fell from his face. "I think he's probably worried about you."

"Worried? ...Why would worry make him mad?"

"Because...hm...no matter how much he worries about you, you don't change. Like he's probably agitated he can't do anything for you."

"Agitated..."

Yuki didn't believe she could fix the relationship between two people who had been together for five years when she only just met them, but she hoped she could help them see what they couldn't on their own.

"I wonder if I made Est worry about me."

"Probably, but I can't say for sure," Yuki commented. He was too deep in thought to hear her.

"...For such a long time?"

Yuki didn't know their past. She didn't know just how long Rifaenotis had been searching for someone or how long since Est realized it.

Rifae abruptly stood from his chair. The feet clattered across the floor. The cornered-look on his face was painful to watch.

"I'll go apologize," he said, leaving through the door Est had.

"What?" Yuki could only watch him leave in silence.

...I wonder if it was okay for me to get involved like that. She sighed a few minutes after the door had shut. *Aren't they both too trusting of me?*

The owners of the house had left a girl they picked up in the middle of nowhere alone in their house with all their possessions.

“It’s not like I’m going to do anything to them or their stuff, but still. It’s great if they make up, but I worry about them with future visitors...” Yuki said to the empty room and slurped her slightly chilled porridge.

Chapter 10

RIFAENOTIS returned with a refreshed countenance by the time Yuki finished breakfast. He thanked her dramatically and told her to come with him. She followed him into the inner room she visited last night. Rifae pulled out a chair for her and had her sit before taking the chair across from her.

“You reconciled,” Yuki grinned.

“Yes. Thank you, Yuki,” Rifae responded with an exquisite smile and turned around to grab a crystal sitting on a platform on the shelf behind him. He moved the crystal and the platform it rested on to the table between him and Yuki. “All right, why don’t I look for the person you’re searching for as thanks?”

The crystal was a mysterious combination of colors, changing from blue to green to yellow depending on the angle. A liquid weaved its way throughout the crystal like a snake. Tendrils of light slithered through it.

“...What a strange crystal. It’s beautiful.”

“Thank you. Mother gave it to me.”

“So pretty,” Yuki sighed, half-enamored by the dancing tendrils of light.

“It’s very useful for searching for people.” Yuki moved from side to side to watch the lights flicker across the crystal’s surface. Rifae smiled fondly at her. “Give me your hand, Yuki.”

“Pardon?” Yuki looked up from where she squatted to watch the crystal from below. Rifae held his left hand out for her.

“Take my hand.” She got back in her seat and sat up straight before placing her hand on top of his palm. “Close your eyes.”

“Okay...” He didn’t explain what he was doing, but Yuki shut her eyes as he commanded.

“Think of the person you are looking for. Yes, like that,” Rifae said in his gentle

tenor.

“Think of him? How exactly should I do that?”

“Anything that comes to mind will work. You can think back to the time you spent together or remember their facial features.”

His face...

Luca’s astoundingly handsome face appeared in the darkness of her closed eyes. The memory of the night sky they gazed at together and his warm back as she rode behind him on the horse played through her mind. She couldn’t forget his reliable, broad back. The memory of him kneeling before her in his ceremonial white and gold armor was quickly followed by the memory of him soaked and half-dressed after jumping into the spring near the castle to save her. His trademark intrepid and annoyed smile colored every memory. It all started from the day he saved her from the spring and flashed a bothered smile at her.

“...That’s good enough. You can open your eyes.” Yuki opened her eyes to his soft, but demanding voice. “This crystal listens to people’s wishes, you see?”

“Wishes?”

“Yes, wishes. There is a limit to its power, and being a Witch’s tool, it throws fits sometimes.”

The crystal throws fits? Sounds like a person.

“You are making a wish to know something; oftentimes people’s desires for what they want to hear over the truth slip in while they try to use the crystal directly, corrupting the information they receive. Hence why I am having you convey your wish to the crystal through me.”

“But it’s a wish, right? I don’t know where Luca is.”

Rifae smiled handsomely. “I’m a Mage, you know? Do you know what a Mage’s predominant ability is?”

Using a crystal to contact anyone they have the power to connect to. What a useful ability in a world without cell phones. It might actually be more useful than the phone. This might be as useful as having a tracking device on someone.

Luca appeared inside the crystal. His image wavered in the tendrils of light—he wouldn't have looked like Prince Luca to anyone who didn't know him well enough. The image flickered unstably, threatening to give Yuki motion sickness if she stared too long.

"Prince Lucat is inside Adolunde Castle." Rifae smiled meaningfully in response to her shock over his knowledge it was Luca in the crystal. He returned his attention to the crystal. "I'm certain this is Adolunde Castle, but...this can't be his room. I wonder if it's underground. He is in a dark and chilly place. Probably a prison cell."

A prison cell... He was imprisoned after all.

"Adolunde Castle's prison is underground," Rifae stated, not from what was shown in the crystal, but from his own knowledge.

Luca...

Luca's shadowy figure wavered inside the crystal. Unable to stand it any longer, Yuki jumped from her chair.

"I'm going."

"What are you going to do when you get there?"

"I don't know, but I have to go!"

"Honestly, I doubt anything can be done by you going there." Rifae wouldn't let go of her hand; he clenched it tightly. "What kind of relationship do you have with Prince Lucat, Yuki?"

What kind of relationship?

"Do you just like him? Or is he your boyfriend? Fiancé? Lover?"

"None of those."

Est asked her the same thing. Luca was neither lover nor family. He fell under neither category, but everything started in the spring on the day they first met.

"I was found and picked up too." Rifaenotis looked up at Yuki, silently urging her to continue. "Luca took me in when I found myself somewhere I didn't know my left from right, and he created a place for me. He told me I could be

here. He said I could come with him! So I want to save him this time. Is that so wrong?" Hot tears filled her eyes.

I can't...cry.

Yuki trembled as she endured the tears. Abruptly, her hand was yanked with incredible force. She lost her balance and fell onto Rifae's chest. Shock dried her tears.

"I made you say something hurtful, didn't I? Sorry for saying mean things, sweetie." He patted her head to comfort her. The calming scent of herbs wafted from his chest. Yuki sniffled as he rubbed her back.

"I didn't say these things because I wanted to bully you, Yuki. It's just that Prince Lucat is enchantingly handsome. Girls who fall for his looks do reckless things when they see him in public. So I tested you." His soft voice comforted her from where he spoke near her ear.

"But to think you were..." Rifae trailed off, hinting at something more, but Yuki couldn't see his face.

Yuki and Rifae pulled away from each other at the same time after she calmed down. He took both of her hands in his and spoke to her as if he were speaking to a child, "My friend—he's a doctor—is supposed to come soon with some medicinal herbs and a new artificial leg for me. I heard they will be traveling all over on their way to Adolunde after they drop by here. Why don't you go with them, Yuki?"

"What?" Yuki blinked several times at his abrupt suggestion.

"You might end up taking a long detour along the way, but I think it's a much better option than going alone."

"I can...go?"

"It's not like you had to get my permission in the first place, honey. But I can't approve of a girl wandering the continent on her own."

"Thank you!" Yuki happily wrapped her arms around Rifae. He sighed ostentatiously.

"...I'm happy you trust me, but you shouldn't be so quick to trust others."

Yuki stepped back and looked down at Rifae—there was something funny about the troubled look on his face.

Rifae is telling me not to be quick to trust? After he picked up a complete stranger, let them into his house without questioning them about who they are, and then left them alone with his stuff? And not just one time either. Yuki was the one baffled by his carelessness. You're the one who didn't give me the chance to be wary of you since the moment we met.

She wanted to believe that was because he trusted her from the moment he picked her up. Laughter shook her small frame.

“You had better listen to the complaints and wisdom of your elders!” Rifae remarked, further digging his own hole. Yuki’s laughter grew stronger. “What? Is my face that amusing to you?”

His frighteningly beautiful face twisted with confusion at her laughter.

Chapter 11

YUKI learned she was more of a child than she realized when compared to Rifaenotis. Their ways of thinking and different perceptions played a role, but craftiness and cunning punctuated the difference between their lives.

“But will they even agree to let me join them?” she muttered during lunch.

“Actually, I’ve already brought it up with them. They will decide after introductions, but I’m certain you will pass any tests, dear.” Rifaenotis grinned.

What was he thinking? She had no idea what went through his mind.

“What are you talking about?” Est asked in a much better mood.

“Vigo and Selena.”

“What? You’re going with those guys?”

Yuki had never heard those names before, but assumed they were who Rifae spoke of, and nodded.

“Heh... They’ll decide when they meet you, huh?”

“Don’t you think she will be fine, Est?”

“Yeah...Selena’s the type to pamper a lost kitten.”

Rifae chuckled.

“So, when are they coming?”

“Last night they said they would arrive within three days.”

“Then we can expect them the day after tomorrow.”

Last night? Something nudged at her mind. Rifae only told her to go with them that morning.

“Hey, Rifae, did you already know?”

A mischievous grin crept over his features. “About what?”

First Vivi, now Rifae. I'm seriously surrounded by people I can't read. I'm in awe...of Witches and their sons.

They ate their lunch of fluffy, vegetable filled omelets.

YUKI spent her days helping Est and Rifaenotis as she waited for Vigo and Selena to arrive. Just past noon, Est would take his sword and disappear somewhere beyond the forest line. When she asked Rifae about it, he answered, "It seems like Est wants to become a Knight."

She stopped herself from asking whose Knight after she glimpsed Rifae's wooden leg—the answer was obvious.

Rifae lived life indulging his whims. He read and compounded tinctures and herbal medicines. Occasionally, he entered the kitchen to use the fire pit, leaving it a black mess for Est to fume over as he scrubbed it with a wet rag.

"You see, nearby is—well, it's not all that nearby, but close enough—anyway, there's an orphanage. I often give them medicine," Rifae explained. The entire time Yuki watched, he mixed the same ingredients together for the same end product.

On the third day, when his friends were supposed to arrive, there were no signs of them even as the morning turned to noon and noon to afternoon. Est returned from his daily training and proceeded to his next chore of chopping firewood. Yuki continued to assist Rifae in mixing medicines.

"...You've been making the same medicine this *entire* time. What is it for?"

"The Ten Day Fever."

"But you said there's no way to counteract the Ten Day Fever..."

"Indeed. But Vigo—the doctor who's supposed to come soon—seems to have succeeded in making a medicine. It's not a miracle potion that will cure people—it can, however, reduce the chance of death," he answered, grinding various herbs, flowers, and seeds together until they turned to a powder.

But isn't creating any medicine to combat the Ten Day Fever an amazing feat?

"I need one more ingredient than what I have to complete it. Vigo is bringing

it here. I wanted to make as much of the base medicine as I can until then.”

“What kind of person is this Vigo? What’s his relationship to you, Rifae?” Yuki asked, handing him a more delicate herb that had to be added in the last minute of grinding or its effects would be nullified.

“Vigo is a doctor and a researcher. He’s an acquaintance from the days I used to live in Rvydom. Currently, he’s wandering the world with Selena searching for anything that can be used to make medicine.”

“And he was researching the Ten Day Fever’s medicine at the same time? He sounds amazing.”

“Apparently so. Well, I’m happy as long as I get work.”

“...Excuse me?”

Yuki’s hand stopped in the middle of crushing a nut. She glanced at Rifae as he ground his mixture. Noticing her gaze, he lifted his face from his work and smiled bewitchingly.

“Look at it this way. Without work, I can’t survive.”

“Oh. That’s true. You need work to survive.”

She returned to her task even as an unsettling feeling niggled at her. The sudden awkwardness made it a little uncomfortable to work beside him.

EVENING came. Yuki went outside to bring in the laundry, which had become one of her chores over the past three days. With the help of a long stick, she retrieved the clothing she had hung out to dry on a makeshift clothesline between two wooden poles. Yuki loved smelling the clothes that were still faintly warm from the sun. As she breathed in its fresh scent, her expression softened.

Behind her, she could hear Est chopping firewood. The occasional sound of a clean chop echoed through the woods. Pulling down the clothes, she tossed them one by one into the laundry basket. The sense of accomplishment at a job well-done spread throughout her. She took pride in her chores.

As if chasing away the deep red of the setting sun, indigo filtered through the

trees from the east. Suddenly, a strong gust whooshed through the woods, lifting a white shirt from the laundry basket into the air.

“Oh no!”

She stared in horror at the shirt swept away by the wind. Before she knew it, she was running after the shirt, the stick she used to take down the laundry thudding on the dirt behind her.

I have to get back the shirt before it falls!

Fluttering away like a butterfly, the shirt blended with the colors of the sky, turning purple. Suddenly, someone’s hand reached out for the runaway shirt and pulled it out of the air. Surprised, Yuki stopped and warily stared at the two horses neighing in front of her.

“...When did this place become a nursery?”

On one horse rode an armor-clad woman; on the other, a man with a frumpy beard and a fatigued expression gripped the shirt.

“Yuki, are you okay—Vigo?! Selena! You’re late!” Est shouted, running to catch up to Yuki from behind. He waved to the riders.

“Oh, shortie! You’ve sprouted up like a beanstalk,” the man said contradictorily, but amusement still colored his tone.

The setting sun bathed the visitors’ faces in red. Yuki’s eyes met the woman’s. She quickly dropped into a low bow, receiving a smile in return.

“U-Um! I might be in your care in the coming days! I-I look forward to getting to know you! A-Also, thank you very much for catching the shirt,” she greeted in a single breath.

Crickets filled the silence between them after her comment. No one answered her. She quizzically lifted her head just as the armored woman—Selena—leapt from her horse, landing right in front of Yuki.

Startled by how close she was, Yuki retreated a step. Selena’s arm shot out and wrapped around her. In a second, she pulled her into a hug with such speed it left her dizzy.

“Eh? Huh? Um?”

“Awww! How cute are you?!”

Selena’s arms tightly squeezed Yuki against her cold, armored chest plate. To top it off, her strength was no joke—it felt like her ribs were going to pop.

“Aah, I knew it,” Est said, triggering Yuki’s memory of his earlier comment.

“Yeah...Selena’s the type to pamper a lost kitten.”

...Is this what he was talking about? Most kittens would die if they were squeezed this hard!

“Vigo, we’re taking this girl with us! Let’s make her the oasis of our travels! All I ever get to see every SINGLE day is your ugly mug. I’m sick of it!”

“Well, sorry about my face. Est, will you lead her horse to the cabin for now?”

“Sure.”

“Vigo, listen to me! I mean, isn’t this girl just so lovable?! Did you see her little bow just now?! Aww, geez, it was too cute!”

Selena strengthened her grip on Yuki.

Geh...I’ve met some troublesome people.

Chapter 12

WHEN the two guests entered Rifaenotis' cabin, Vigo headed to Rifae's room in the back and Selena took to the bathing area to clean off after a long journey on horseback. Meanwhile, Est and Yuki made dinner, and in no time it was time to eat.

Rifae took it upon himself to introduce Yuki to his guests: Vigo Kollo and Selena Beautante. Like Rifae, they had served in Rvydom's military. Selena held the rank of Black Knight and was contracted with Vigo. A black ring glistened on her right hand.

Oh, looks like rings take on the same color as the Knight's rank.

Thinking back on how her own ring was violet and Tita's was brown, her heart squeezed.

"Okay, cutting straight to the point, you will be taking Yuki along with you, yes?" Rifae insisted after dinner when the five of them surrounded the tiny dining table as Est served after-dinner tea.



Yuki's situation had been summarized for them during dinner.

"Don't make it sound like a question when you plan on forcing her on us," Vigo demurred, tossing back his drink. Being the only one drinking alcohol, his breath reeked of liquor.

"Pretty much, yeah," Rifae confessed with a chuckle. The softness in his expression led Yuki to believe they were really good friends.

"I'm all for it! Charging headfirst into danger for the man she loves without even stopping to consider the consequences is hopelessly reckless, but I like the sound of it!" Selena chimed in.

I never said I was doing this for a man I love... Plus, she just bluntly called me reckless and mocked my plans.

Selena's left hand had stayed on top of Yuki's head ever since dinner ended. Not once did she stop stroking Yuki's hair like she was some kind of cat.

"Selena, you seriously need to listen to what other people say."

"Oh my, but I did listen?"

Rifae sighed. With perfect timing, Est placed a cup of black tea in front of him. An aromatic scent wafted with the steam.

"Either way, I'm in support of taking her. What about you, Vigo?" Selena asked, tossing a glare over at Vigo who leisurely sipped on his vodka as he studied Yuki.

"From here we are going to travel around Rvydom distributing medicine to the sick. It will be a long detour before you get to Adolunde," he pointed out between sips.

"Yeah, I know," Yuki answered without a moment's delay. Vigo's eyebrow arched.

"Nice reply... But do you really *know* what it entails? It means we're going to where the Ten Day Fever is most rampant."

The Ten Day Fever...I forgot about that. Rifae has been making medicine all this time. Distributing it is their primary goal.

"I understand the risks." She flattened her lips in a straight line.

"You don't understand the risks. I'm trying to warn you—you might catch the Ten Day Fever."

Oh, that's a good point.

"Selena's a Knight, so she can't catch it. Well, even if she does, it won't do much to her. Incidentally, I'm one of the few who caught it in the past and made it through alive. I won't ever be afflicted with it again. This is why we can go into the highly infectious areas without issue. Have you ever caught the Ten Day Fever before?"

It's unrelated to the mumps, chickenpox, and measles, right?

"...I haven't."

A loud sigh cracked the silence, followed by the cloying scent of alcohol.

"I haven't...but!" All eyes were on Yuki. "I have no intention of dying either! So I'm coming with you!" She laid out all her cards in one loud shout, causing Est to jump just as he tried to put down her cup of tea. "Ah, sorry."

"Uh, don't be. Here...drink up," Est said, wiping the side of the teacup where the tea trickled down and safely put it in front of her this time.

Yuki nodded, reaching for the teacup. Selena caught her hand before she could grab the cup. Before she knew it, Yuki had been pulled on top of Selena's lap. Once again, she was squeezed from behind like a stuffed animal.

"Oh my gosh! What a short-tempered and foolhardy girl you are! So cute! She's just so lovable and precious, Vigo!"

Is she complimenting or mocking me?

The soft mounds pressing against her back and the pleasant, woody scent coming from behind her were comforting. It reminded her of her parents' tendency to hug and squeeze her. Being hugged brought back a long-forgotten nostalgia for home.

"Sassy brat, aren't ya? ...Rifaenotis, you've picked up another strange pet."

"Oh, but Yuki is a sweet kid, you know? She's considerate and often helps out

with whatever's needed. She's got a knack for tidying up."

"That's only because you couldn't tidy up if your life depended on it."

"My, what an affront. Everyone else is simply *more* adept at it."

"Is that what you've convinced yourself?" Vigo remarked. "'ey, precocious brat. Outta respect for ya grit, I'll bring ya along."

"Really?" asked Selena, not Yuki. "We did it, Yuki! We need to be grateful to Rifaenotis."

"Uh? What?"

Why Rifae?

Yuki squirmed to escape the arms squeezing her even tighter. Selena pinned her arms behind her back so she couldn't struggle anymore, during which Yuki glimpsed Rifae's face.

"Because Vigo was against bringing you from the start. Didn't he refuse you as well, Rifaenotis?"

"He did?!" Yuki swiveled her head toward Vigo. He slept with his face planted on the table. A booming snore came from him every few minutes. Rifae said nothing, a smile plastered on his pretty face.

"You must have really gotten Rifaenotis to favor you, Yuki. Of course, I've taken a liking to you too," Selena gushed, squeezing Yuki again.

"Gya!" She started choking as Selena's arm put too much pressure on her stomach.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Selena apologized, loosening her death-grip.

"...Rifae, didn't you say I would pass the test and be fine with them? This isn't what you promised," Yuki pouted.

"Oh, but isn't it?" Rifae grinned. "Didn't it turn out just fine?"

"But Vigo was against it—"

"But he ended up agreeing. Everyone present is a witness to it."

Sure, that's how things ended up, but what if we couldn't convince him? What

was he planning to do then?

“It’s Vigo’s fault for having a weakness for alcohol. He doesn’t even consider he might get taken advantage of.”

“What?”

“Wow, scary,” Selena breathed behind her.

“Was it your plan from the start to ply him with alcohol and get your way once he was too drunk to think straight?”

In place of an answer, he offered a bewitching smile. “I can’t stand anyone who opposes me, dear.” Riffae finished off his tea.

...Is this what it means to be an adult? How long ago did he plan for this?

“And this is why I never want to make an enemy of Riffaenotis! Est! You mustn’t ever become an adult like him! Aaah, and Yuki, I don’t want you getting infected by his cunning disease either!” Selena increased her stranglehold again.

Ugh. I’m going to barf.

“M-Miss S-Selena!”

“I don’t want you being formal with me like we’re strangers! Call me Selena!” she ordered, putting more pressure around Yuki’s abdomen.

“S-S-Selenaaaa. Uuum, arms. Your a-arms. I’m gonna b-barf...”

“Riffae, would you like another cup of tea?”

“Yes, please. Selena, sweetie, why don’t you quit loving on her like a child unbecoming of your age?”

“I’ll think about it if you quit using that feminine tone with me.”

“S-S-Selena...”

Vigo’s snores filled in the silence between their back-and-forth quips. And, just like that, the night wore on.

Chapter 13

BY the time she realized it, Yuki was fast asleep in the same bed as Selena. Although the cabin was the perfect size for two people, there weren't enough beds for five people to spend the night.

I woke up early again.

The morning sun had partially begun its ascent as a faint light glowed behind the curtains, lighting the darkness. Yuki squirmed out of bed, careful not to wake Selena. With one giant yawn, she departed Rifae's bedroom. She opened the door to the dark hallway, her eyes trailing to the dim light seeping under the door across from the living room—Rifae's study.

"Rifae, are you awake?" Yuki asked, softly knocking on the door.

"Come in," he answered. An herbal smell hung in the room. Rifae sat at his desk making the same Ten Day Fever medicine.

"Rifae?!"

"Ooh, Yuki. Morning, dearie." He glanced up at her, never taking his hands off the pestle and mortar. Dark bags hung under his eyes and powder splotched his cheeks and the tip of his nose.

"What are you doing...?"

A single look would tell what he was doing—compounding medicine. Even so, she had to ask.

"You know how Selena said you guys would be leaving today? I thought I should make as much medicine as possible until then."

The powdery medicine, no bigger than her thumb nail, had tripled in amount since she last assisted him.

"How do you take this medicine?"

"Mix it into hot water and drink it. Cold water will work too, but it'll end up

much thicker. The water takes on a mucky, thick brown texture that's pretty gross to look at. But if it cures you, even the nasty stuff is worth suffering through."

He ran his fingertips through the powder, building a small pile out of it. The medicine compounded from dark-green and scum-green herbs put a bitter taste in Yuki's mouth just by smelling it.

"Isn't this medicine incredible?"

They had created a miracle medicine to help with an illness that had once reduced the majority of the world's population to death. Wasn't it an incredible feat?

"I wonder sometimes. It will be a step toward success if it decreases the fatality rate at all. But there's no guarantee it will help everyone. We can't get people's hopes up needlessly."

"Why not?"

"This isn't a miracle cure that will heal anyone who takes it. We can't take responsibility for patients who buy the medicine and still die without getting better."

"I see..."

A lot goes into making a single medicine.

"Besides, a medicine for the Ten Day Fever has been in the works for decades."

"It has?"

"Yes. Taking what had been researched and adding an additional ingredient resulted in this medicine."

Yuki saw all the ingredients when she assisted Rifae in mixing them together, but she couldn't stop from having doubts about the powdery concoction resulting from compounding several different shades of smelly green.

"That reminds me, you added in the ingredient Vigo brought for you, right? What kind of medicinal plant was it?"

“Hm?” Rifaenotis flashed a grin and pulled a violet ore from somewhere. “Surprised? I was shocked too. Vigo often has outlandish ideas.”

W-Well, I guess some Earth medicines make use of mold...

Yuki stared at the glistening violet ore.

A few hours later, everyone woke up, ate the breakfast Est made, and packed their things. Yuki stuffed several changes of clothes given to her by Est, the Ten Day Fever Medicine, dried fruit and dried meat into the jute bag Vivi had handed her more than two weeks ago. Est wrapped essentials and nonessentials in two neat cloth bags for her to take as she had little of her own to survive a venture into the woods once more.

The sun ascended into the sky, and not wanting to leave too late into the afternoon, they decided to leave as soon as they ate lunch.

“He got me again,” Vigo cursed under his breath, babying a dreadful headache accompanying his hangover. Hurried along by an awfully cheery Selena, he sagged onto the back of his horse.

Summoned by Selena, Yuki hung her bag over her shoulder. Rifaenotis and Est watched her. Adjusting the straps over her shoulder, she bowed to them. “You really took care of me these past few days. Thank you very much for showing kindness to me when I had nowhere else to go.”

Rifae returned her smile and Est turned his face away from it. Knowing that was just Est hiding his shyness proved how well she had gotten to know him.

“Rifae, thank you for telling me a lot of things too. Thanks to you, I feel like I know what I want to do now.”

“Really? Glad to hear it, dear. Oh, right,” Rifae said, pulling a black bag from behind him and holding it out to her. “A farewell gift for you, sweetie.”

“For me? Thank you. Can I look at it?” She confirmed his nod and opened the thin bag. “...How?”

A wooden bow and a quiver with a good supply of arrows peeked out of the bag. Tucked beside them was a pair of leather gloves to protect her hands.

“How did you know...?”

“Your skin was tough and coarse in all the necessary places when I held your hand,” he explained with a smile that was a mirror of the smile he flashed the day they met in the rain.

I think he has thicker skin than me in the figurative sense.

“Yuki, you can trust us to a degree,” he started, bending to eye level with her. “This might not be convincing coming from me, but you will fare much better in life if you don’t trust people you just met. You let your defenses down too easily. You are going to dangerous places. Keep your wits about you at all times.”

He makes a good point, but I’ve been blessed with all the people I have met so far. I’ve seen things I would have never dreamed of and learned more than I wanted to know.

“I think you are correct, Rifae.”

Yes, everything Rifaenotis ever said was always correct. But—

“Someone who’s an oddity like me can’t be the first to doubt someone. I have to trust them first. Because if I start off by being suspicious of them, they will become even more suspicious of me. I’ll lose my chance to earn their trust. ‘If you trust them first, they will come to trust you.’”

Selena called for Yuki from her horse.

“That was what Pa—my father taught me! I won’t stop trusting others, whoever they may be.” Embarrassed by what she said, she forced a smile to distract from the pink hue on her cheeks. Wanting to change the topic, she thought back to the shadowy figure reflected in the crystal. “S-Speaking of which, the person I glimpsed in your crystal the other day kind of looks like my father.”

She smiled at Rifaenotis, but something sharp glinted in his eyes. “If I may ask...where is your father now?”

“What?” The last day she saw him replayed in her mind. The spitefully cloudless sky. The weightless plummet as the world whizzed by her. His face

looking down dolefully at her. "...Somewhere far away."

"YUKI! We're going!" Selena bellowed.

"Ah, okaaay! I'd better get going. Thanks for the bow and arrows!" She waved and dashed off.

"Yuki!" She looked back. Rifaenotis knelt before her with his new artificial leg. "...Please, stay healthy..."

"I will! Thanks!" She gave a big nod and waved a second time.

Selena's long arm reached down and pulled her onto the horse in front of her. She pulled on the reins and kicked, sending Yuki forward with a jerk as the horse galloped away. Without looking back, she locked her eyes on the scenery ahead.

"Our first stop will be at the closest orphanage to here," Selena explained.

"Okay."

"Try not to talk too much to avoid biting your tongue."

After a jerky nod from Yuki, Selena kicked her boot into the horse's side again.

MORE than once, he thought the girl resembled his Sovereign. First, there was the shocking fact anyone could be as naïve and innocent as that man. And then there was his despondency that he wouldn't mind if that person was the only one with such innocence. Finally, there was the nostalgic warmth he hadn't felt in ages.

"If you trust them first, they will come to trust you."

At all times, his Sovereign repeated those words to himself and befriended everyone without question. Overwhelmingly more people took advantage of his trust rather than be grateful. Yet his Sovereign still continued to trust the masses.

It was because he was such a person that Rifaenotis wanted to protect him with everything he had.

"Lord Cahn..."

The treasure he couldn't protect.

"...Far away."

No doubt the place she spoke of was somewhere Rifaenotis couldn't go. No, if he tried he could go, but there was no guarantee he would find him.

"...Is that the person you're searching for, Rifae?"

Snapping back to reality, he wondered how long he stood in the same spot he bid the girl farewell. The sound of hooves had long since disappeared into the woods.

Has he been standing beside me this whole time?

Rifaenotis opened his mouth, but didn't know what to say. Est had always hated the man he sought. A man he had never even laid eyes on before. Worried because Rifae wouldn't stop searching for him.

Worried... Those ashen eyes watched him careful, waiting for a reaction. *Is he worried about me?*

A deliberately loud sigh cut through his confusion.

"Forget it. It's not like I'm angry you're looking for him. I-If anything, you could say I feel bad for not helping you with the search. I'll assist you with it now."

Daggers pierced his heart. The fact this small boy's existence had grown more important than the loss of his Sovereign—a loss he had long since known about—moreover, the fact he caused him worry penetrated his very being with pain.

All this time... When did he notice? Since when did he start watching over me? With his small body and young age.

His body moved before he thought about it.

"So? What's their name?"

His arms wrapped around Est's shoulders. He hugged the body two sizes smaller than his own.

"Huh? Um? Rifae...?"

"It's fine now."

“What’s fine?”

“It’s fine. That person isn’t here anymore.”

Rifae knew that long, long ago. He simply became stubborn because he didn’t want to acknowledge it. Just how much did his stubbornness hurt Est?

I’m sorry. Thank you.

Est seemed like he would break if Rifaenotis squeezed him too tightly, yet he still frantically tried to support Rifaenotis’ body with his own. He always, always stayed by his side.

That person isn’t around anymore. But I have this child. This time, for sure, I will protect him with all my power.

LATE into the evening the howl of wind battered the cabin’s walls with a deluge of raindrops. A candle flickered dully in the corner of the room. Rifae’s only true source of light was the blood moon piercing through the thick black clouds laden with fat raindrops.

Diligently he worked with a variety of herbs, careful to sort them out and prepare the poultices for when Selena and Vigo returned. There were any number of routes the future may lead too; each and every path had a use for his concoctions.

A heavy thud caused the window to shake in place, the wind howled and the rain increased as the storm grew. The air puffed in front of his oddly chilled lips. Rifae paused at the oddity. While it was cool at the moment, the sudden drop in temperature shouldn’t have been so great. Frost covered his desk and the uncut herbs grew icicles that reflected the light of the blood moon.

Rifae pushed back from his desk and stood, fear clutched at his heart as he realized the very floorboards were now covered in frost, as were a number of walls. Shadows crawled along the floor, and wherever the light failed to touch the very darkness seemed to writhe with tendrils.

“I see, so my guess was right—she is the one.” At his words the room grew even colder. Air puffed out with his every breath and only the blood moon

provided any light as the candle flickered out with a suffocating pop.

Dark unseen fingers fluttered against his flesh, dancing around his throat as an invisible grip began to squeeze.

Rifae stood firm, even as the fear all but threatened to consume him. “No matter what happens, the path leading forward is set.” The grip tightened further, he coughed but remained standing, “I-I will serve as I have always served. And there is...someone I must protect.”

Air rushed into his lungs as the feeling of a hand on his throat faded away, a cackling echoed through the room and with a sudden burst of warmth the darkness fled. Rifae jumped at the sudden snap of a candle relighting—even the storm sounded weaker.

“What a troublesome guardian you have, Yuki.” Rifae mumbled rubbing at his throat. With a heavy sigh, he returned to his work, the room around him once more silent as the rain continued to fall.

Chapter 14

GALLOPING for four hours straight brought them to the orphanage closest to Rifaenotis' cabin. Vigo and Selena were acquainted with the orphanage and were allowed inside the grounds without question. While they called it an orphanage, the building wasn't unique or particularly large. It looked similar to the countless inns Yuki had stayed at during her travels with Luca. The biggest difference from those inns was the walls had been knocked down between smaller rooms to make more space and the kitchen and dining area were accessible on the first floor.

They greeted the orphanage's headmaster and exchanged light small talk in his office. The headmaster was a man in his mid-forties with an unassuming smile. The way he surmised everything with a smile reminded Yuki of her parents. Her heart squeezed at the memory of the people who had abandoned her to another world.

Shortly after they finished talking, children of all sizes and ages poured into the office. Toddlers tottered on unsteady feet, helped along by the older girls who looked like they should be in middle school. Visitors were rare to the orphanage—some of the shier children peered around the doorway.

"Hey, Miss, where did you come from?"

"Let's play! Guess what? Guess what? The headmaster knitted me a new dolly!"

"O-Oh? Um..." Yuki stammered, unsure of how to deal with the children scrambling over to her, fighting to be the first to rattle on about themselves.

As Yuki struggled to pick a child to address first, Selena reached down and lifted up one of the toddlers. "Okay, let's all play together! Let's go to the playroom!"

"Okay!"

“Hurry, hurry!”

Selena winked at Yuki. “Yuki, help Vigo out for me, okay?” she said, leaving with the children for the room across the hall. Silence replaced their absence.

Vigo yawned widely, not caring to cover it with his hand. “So? I take it there are no particularly unhealthy children here?”

“Actually...there is one child who has been under the weather for several days now.”

Vigo’s demeanor quickly changed. “Where are they?”

“She said she isn’t that sick and took to tending the children in the big room on the second floor.”

“Even though she’s ill?”

“We have a lot of infants and toddlers in our care. The few older children have taken it upon themselves to look after the younger ones...” the headmaster guiltily explained.

“What’re you going to do if that child has contracted the Ten Day Fever and infected the others?! Damn it!” Vigo bolted out of his chair, flipping it backward, and stormed off to where the girl was. Yuki quickly jumped up and followed after him. The headmaster trailed behind her.

“Headmaster, I don’t care if it’s just a small room, but I need you to prepare me a space no one else can enter.”

“A-All right!” the headmaster agreed, dashing to the opposite end of the hall to clear a space for Vigo.

They entered the big room on the second floor to find a gaggle of children clinging to an older girl. Sitting in the middle of the room surrounded by the children was a teenage girl around fourteen or fifteen. The reddish-brown color of her hair left a strong first impression. She stared blankly at Vigo, rocking an infant in her arms.

She doesn’t look unwell to me.

“This is the one,” Vigo determined at a glance and strode straight for her. Frightened by his wicked scowl, the children clamored and pushed to hide

behind the girl.

“Excuse me, what do you think you are doing? The children finally started to fall asleep, so I would appreciate it if you—”

Without listening to the girl, Vigo put his hand to her forehead and neck. “You’re burning up. You’ve been pushing yourself too hard. When did it start?”

Surprise flitted across her face, only to be replaced by petulance. “No, I’m not. I’m fine.”

“When did it start?” he repeated, an unrelenting edge in his tone.

“Three days ago,” she muttered softly.

“Three days? ...Curse it all.”

Vigo snatched the baby from the girl’s arms and pressed the now bawling child into Yuki’s hands. He lifted the girl into his arms and left the room with her. A new appreciation for Vigo being an actual doctor came to Yuki as she proceeded to pacify the crying baby and trembling children.

“Doctors are incredible,” she muttered to herself.

Neither Yuki nor the children could go where Vigo took the girl. Yuki resolved to fill in for the girl as much as possible until she got better.

ASIDE from the headmaster, the tiny orphanage only housed orphans and no other adults. A little less than twenty children lived there. More than half were children under the age of ten. The girl who had come down with the fever—Chiruka—was the oldest child at age fifteen. A thirteen-year-old boy was the second oldest after her. Chiruka had taken responsibility for the majority of housework around the orphanage. Meals were cooked by her and she cared for the younger children as well. Yuki and Selena took over comforting the children, the laundry, and cooking after Chiruka collapsed.

“Still, I’m in awe of everything that girl does.”

“Right? It’s amazing she did all of this by herself.”

Even with Selena and Yuki handling the chores together, they often wished

they had more help.

“She wasn’t doing it by herself. All the kids here look after each other. Everyone who’s older takes care of those younger than them. They’ve been raised that way. I think they’ve had it pretty rough,” Selena responded.

The noisy dining hall buzzed with energy and the laughter of children. Yuki ladled soup into bowls. A child younger than ten put the bowls on a tray and carried the tray to the other children sitting patiently at their tables. Watching them brought a smile to her face. Selena served barley gruel beside her.

“But why are there only children here? Selena, haven’t you been here before? Has it always been like this?”

“There were older children the last time I was here.”

“Then where—”

“Isn’t it obvious? There was a *war*.”

Yuki accidentally spilled the soup on her hand. Oddly enough, it didn’t burn, but her left hand tingled.

“Aaah, look at what you did. Are you all right?” Selena held a cloth out to her. She accepted it, but froze with it dangling from her fingers.

There was a war. That’s right. Rvydom’s soldiers were the largest victims in the war between Adolunde and Maruk. Soldiers weren’t the only victims—normal people too.

Did those very people stand where Yuki stood now, serving the children of this orphanage? Sadness hit Yuki in a wave that squeezed her heart and knotted her stomach. But even if she felt sad, she couldn’t let it show externally.

“Miss Yuki, what’s wrong? Does your hand hurt?” asked a little boy with big, round blue eyes.

The worry he openly showed for her warmed her heart, only to be replaced by the horrible image of the boy not much older than this one who had been slain in front of her by Orga. The soup on her hand brought back memories of his hot blood splattered across her. Her powerlessness and helplessness rushed back to her with mortifying anguish. The trauma of that day so fresh in her

memory had her digging her nails into her hands.

“Miss Yuki?” the boy’s worried inquiry snapped her back from the horrifying memory.

“I’m okay. Thank you,” she managed to get out.

What am I doing making a small boy worry about me? I’m here to help, not get helped.

She smiled and patted him on the head. Relieved, he grinned broadly at her.

“Let me know if anyone ever bothers you! I’ll beat ‘em up for you! Miss Chiruka always says to be nice to girls!” the boy declared proudly, punching the air.

“Really? Be sure to protect all the girls here too.”

“I sure will! I’ll protect Miss Chiruka and everyone else!”

Wow. Chiruka is really idolized by the other children. And she’s currently fighting off a fever...

“I hope Miss Chiruka gets better soon.”

I want her to recover as soon as possible. Her health protects the children’s smiles and the well-being of this orphanage.

Yuki’s fleeting wish ended fruitlessly as that very night Chiruka broke out in a sickening rash.

Chapter 15

THE first symptoms of the Ten Day Fever appeared after a two to three day incubation period. It starts with a high fever lasting several days until hives erupt in a gruesome rash across the infected body. The only documented cases of patients recovering from the Ten Day Fever were people whose fever broke before reaching the rash stage. Very few patients ever recovered after developing the rash.

Vigo instilled that knowledge in Yuki, making sure she understood the fatality, but she refused to give up hope.

THREE days passed since Chiruka's skin erupted with the red, oozing rash—confirmation she had contracted the Ten Day Fever and not just a common cold. Now, the children weren't even allowed within five feet of the room she lay in. At the loss of the oldest child and the one who took leadership of the younger kids, everyone became anxious and restless.

No matter how much Yuki and Selena played with them, the smiles they freely shared on the first day all but vanished. Vigo stayed at Chiruka's bedside and didn't come out to interact with the other children out of fear the contagion might spread from him. Selena, being immune, brought him and Chiruka food, and took on other miscellaneous chores so they wouldn't need to leave the room.

"I feel really bad about all this. We originally planned to leave much sooner," Selena apologized as she folded the laundry. The children were fast asleep after a fun afternoon of games.

Yuki shook her head. "Don't fret on my behalf. I want to get to Adolunde as soon as possible, but...I don't think I can do anything for them even if I go."

I can't even do anything for the people suffering in front of me.

“Besides, seeing how people live normally is a good learning experience as well!”

Aridol’s history, common knowledge, and social etiquette were all foreign to Yuki. Each aspect of this world was new to her, disillusioning her about her ignorance.

But ignorance isn’t an excuse. That’s why I have to strive to learn more.

Selena stared at Yuki, surprise flashing in her amber eyes. “You make it sound like you’ve never lived a normal life.”

“Did I? Ah, um...I’ve been overseas all this time!”

“What?! You came from the other side of the sea?!” she marveled. Yuki gave a firm nod. Selena whistled. “I’ve heard of people occasionally being washed ashore from beyond the wicked seas, but to think you were one of them.”

“I am. The person who took care of me after I washed ashore is currently in Adolunde.”

I’m not lying.

“Aww, shucks. I was completely under the impression you were risking the dangers to reunite with a long-lost love!” Selena pursed her lips in a sad pout.

Yuki giggled as she grabbed the next piece of laundry from the basket to fold. “A long-lost love, huh? I don’t even know what he thinks of me.”

A spark twinkled in Selena’s eyes like a shark sensing a drop of blood. “Oh, what’s this? What’s this? Was I right? You’re going to reunite with a man? Is he your unrequited love?”

Selena scooted closer to Yuki on the lounge chair. She shot out her hand to stop the laundry folded on the chair next to her from tumbling over.

“What were you expecting? ...Well, he is a guy, but my feelings—”

“AW! Okay, what kind of man is he?”

“Wh-What kind? ...Never mind me. What about you, Selena?”

“I don’t matter in this conversation.”

“That’s not fair!”

“You caught me,” Selena teased, sticking out her tongue. “I’ll talk about my situation if you tell me about yours.”

Selena went about methodically folding the laundry. The way she refused to pressure Yuki into talking about something she might not want to discuss brought a smile to her face.

What an adult. Selena could prattle on like a schoolgirl, but she never tried to pry too deep into anything Yuki wanted to keep to herself. That consideration tickled. *What is there for me to talk about?*

“There’s not much for me to talk about.” Selena’s gaze drifted to Yuki’s face and locked on her eyes. Yuki smiled when she noticed. “He just happened to be in the right place at the right time to find me, and he took me under his care on a whim.”

And then he contracted with me on a whim.

Yuki stroked her right middle finger. “He had to go somewhere, so he took me with him. Then I ended up following him somewhere I shouldn’t have and caused all sorts of trouble with my selfishness. We got into a fight, so I ran away in a rage. We’ve been separated ever since...that’s all there is to it.”

Putting it into words really highlights how shallow our relationship is.

“I was nothing but trouble. Someone came to find me, but we still ended up being separated. I honestly knew nothing about anything. I just accepted what others provided me with, without giving back. I depended on them and only ever thought of myself.”

What should I do if he annuls the contract the next time we meet? A self-mocking smile unknowingly crept onto her face. She squeezed her right hand until it turned white.

“So, you’re going to apologize to him?”

“...Yeah.”

“I see. Then all is well that ends well! Apologizing requires a lot of courage too. Just thinking they might not forgive you or will say horrible things, scares a lot of people out of taking action.” Selena feigned a shudder. A small laugh

escaped Yuki. “You’re a good girl, Yuki.”

“Am I?”

I just told her about how spoiled and selfish I am though.

Yuki stared at Selena, trying to see past her unreadable mask. “I’m as stubborn as you can be. I’m terrible at apologizing. Not once have I apologized to Vigo.”

“Now that you mention it, what is your relationship with Vigo?”

Yuki worried she might be disturbing their time together if they were traveling as a couple, but not once had they shown anything remotely romantic toward one another. She hoped they weren’t holding back for her sake.

“Me and Vigo? Good question. If I had to label us, I’d say we are something like siblings,” she said indifferently.

“Siblings?!” Yuki examined Selena. Light purple hair grew past her shoulders, accentuating the orange hue of her almond eyes. The ephemeral, clean-cut Selena and the gruff, unshaven Vigo—were siblings?

“U-Uhh, who is older?”

Catching on to Yuki’s thought process, Selena blanched. “Stop right there. I don’t like where this is going. What were you imagining? We’re not actually blood related. We’re in-laws! Vigo is my husband’s little brother.”

“Pardon?”

Husband—Yuki’s mind got stuck on that one word.

“You’re married, Selena?!” Yuki slapped her hands over her mouth when her question came out much louder than she intended. She surveyed the room, where the children rolled over in their sleep, but otherwise showed no sign of waking. Relieved, she dropped her hands.

Selena grinned. “You can say that. I used to be my husband’s Knight. We were a famous couple in our hometown. We reversed the stereotypical gender role for a bonded Knight,” she added with a laugh. Yuki laughed with her.

“Neat. I wish I could have seen that. Why did you bond with Vigo then?”

What course of events led to her bonding with her husband's older brother instead? Yuki cocked her head as she tried to puzzle her way to the answer, getting a confused look out of Selena.

They gave each other questioning looks until Selena suddenly snapped her fingers. "Oh, that's right. You came from overseas. I guess it's only natural for you not to know."

"Know what?"

"My husband died. His last request was to look after his older brother, so here I am protecting that hell-raiser."

He died... Yuki's expression dropped, horrified she stepped on yet another landmine. Selena quickly reassured her it was no big deal.

"Well, we've always been on good terms. I thought it wouldn't be so bad to be with him for the rest of my life."

...The rest of her life? Spend the rest of her life with Vigo?

"Why would you be together for life?"

"Oh? Because once a Knight enters into a bonding contract, they can't be free of it until their Master dies."

We can't annul the contract until I die?

"You might not know this, Yuki, but a contract between a man and woman is typically considered similar to a marriage proposal. Aah, except for the rare cases where siblings form a contract."

"A marriage...proposal?"

"That's right. When a male Knight makes a lady his Master, it's usually a form of marriage. Every girl admires having it happen to her someday! Her Knight will kneel before her and pledge to protect her for life."

Yuki's hand froze midstroke of the ring-less space on her middle finger.

"...It's all because of such a common understanding that Vigo and I often get confused as a married couple. And now I can't freely seek out another relationship. I seriously despise the spiteful bearded man!"

What every girl admires?

In that hopelessly spacious place, Luca knelt in front of her for his armies and Orga to bear witness. Ain's fury over their contract. Nasette and Tita's sheer shock. Orga's inquiry over whether they understood what their actions meant. All along, Yuki had believed their shock had been over the fact her contract had been with a prince. And the fact she was a stranger plucked from nowhere. She had been convinced they could cancel their contract should either of them feel inconvenienced by it. And yet—

“...A spur-of-the-moment impulse.”

The frighteningly beautiful man she had contracted with had unmistakably said those words to her under the gorgeous night sky, streaked by falling stars.

A contract for life was done on a spur-of-the-moment impulse?

Marriage proposal. Every girl's fantasy. A contract that won't end without one of them dying. Those words danced around her head, tormenting her. Only now did she understand the meaning behind Vivi's smirk.

“...Yuki? What's wrong?”

She knew the heat had risen to her cheeks, dyeing them a deep crimson. “What? What does it all mean? What did he mean, ‘Contracting with you may have been a spur-of-the-moment impulse on my half, but I don't regret it’? Uh? Um? Is *that* what it means?” Yuki sputtered incoherently. Her racing heart didn't know how to slow down as it pumped all the blood to her face.

“Yuki, are you possibly contracted with a Knight?”

Contract equals marriage proposal. Those words took control of Yuki's every thought.

“Gaaaaah!” Embarrassed, she buried her face in the mountain of newly folded laundry.

A marriage proposal may only come once in a lifetime if not at all. Someday she would grow up, have a crush, fall in love, and then be proposed to as her heart pounded in her chest. Yet, without her knowing it, she was proposed to. To make it worse, everyone around knew about it—only Yuki didn't know the

deep meaning of what transpired, of what it all meant.

Why didn't anyone tell me?!

“Stupid Luca! Stupid Luca! Luca you stupid jerk! You should explain critical things to meeeeeee!”

No matter how much she cursed him, her calm wouldn't restore itself. She shouted a line of curses that woke up the children. With groggy eyes their mouths fell open as they witnessed Selena giddily shout, “You're too cute!” and squeeze the bright-red Yuki.

Chapter 16

YUKI tossed a menacing look at Selena as she doubled over with laughter before finally letting go of her.

“Ahaha. I’m only kidding. Only about half end up married.”

“It’s not a joke then!”

The surprised children pushed out of their beds and ran over to the women thinking they were up to something fun.

“Yeah, but the sheer fact he contracted with you must mean he doesn’t have a bad opinion of you, I’d say,” Selena said, going over to the children’s bedding to roll it up and put it out of the way. “No sane Knight would bind themselves to someone they dislike, much less despise. Even if they were offered all the fortunes in the world.”

Yuki helped roll up Selena’s bedding where it lay on the floor. Since coming to the orphanage, they had slept in the big room with all the younger children. “If we go by that logic, then you must like Vigo too.”

“What?” A blanket slipped from Selena’s hands and tumbled onto the floor. The children running behind her as a game crashed into her muscled legs. She scooped up a little boy on the verge of tears and fixed an unreadable gaze on Yuki’s face.

“What’s that look for? Am I wrong?”

“No! You’re not wrong!” she spluttered. Yuki didn’t have a jot about what she was so flustered about. “Yes. I like him. I love him!”

Yuki smiled broadly as she set down the folded bedding and grabbed another shirt from the laundry basket. “Glad to hear it. You see, I like him too. He’s got a sharp tongue, but I like how he’s good at looking after other people despite it. Oh, for the record, I like you too, Selena,” she asserted.

A clearly despondent Selena collapsed onto a pile of blankets. "...Yuuuki, that's cruel. Too unfair."

"Huh? What is?"

Taking Selena's dramatic collapse on the bedding as some sort of game, the children started piling up on her. They giggled as they dog-piled on top of each other. Selena laughed too and started wrestling with the children, knocking down their pile. Yuki finished folding the laundry and stood up with a pile in her hands.

"Rita wants to help too."

Yuki turned toward the soft voice to find a girl around five tugging on her sleeve. The girl went by Rita and while she was the quiet type, she was very considerate of others despite her young age. She always offered to help with the chores. It was impressive how far Chiruka's influence went with the children.

"Thank you, Rita. Can you take this amount for me then?" Yuki asked, placing a few shirts in Rita's small, outstretched hands. "Rita, I forgot where you store your clothes. Do you mind showing me where to go?"

"This way." Rita happily nodded and took the lead down the hallway. Yuki slowly followed behind her.

All the children here are really good kids. They walked down the hall until Rita turned around in front of one of the rooms.

"This is the place, Miss Yuki."

"Oh, that's right! Thanks, Rita." Yuki pushed the door open with her foot and froze, her nails digging into the pile of clothes the only thing keeping them from slipping to the ground as her stomach churned at the man she saw inside.

Maruk's prince.

The invisible burns and scars on her chest stung and stabbed. Her breath caught in her throat. Inside the room were the orphanage's headmaster and Maruk's second prince—the one who drugged her in the tower and sent her to be burned at the stake as the Witch he knew she wasn't. Panic mounted inside

her. Bile rose to her throat.

“Pasch!” Noticing the second prince—Pasch—Rita’s expression blossomed into a wide smile and she ran over to him.

“Rita!” he exclaimed.

“Come now, Rita. How many times must I warn you not to address him as such?”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind. What are you up to, Rita?”

“I came to put away the laundry!”

“You’re such a good girl,” he praised, patting the top of her head. He looked up from her when he noticed Yuki motionlessly standing in the doorway. Those familiar ultramarine eyes that haunted her nightmares locked onto her face. She instinctively turned her face away. “You—”

Oh no! Yuki regretted how blatant her action was. Did she give herself away? But I look different now. I-I should be safe, right?

She turned back and flashed him a brilliant smile even she was surprised she could muster under the tension threatening to cause a mental breakdown. Taken by surprise, Pasch’s eyes widened.

“She is an assistant accompanying a doctor who is currently staying here. She has done much good by us, looking after the children and handling the chores,” the headmaster mentioned, introducing Yuki.

“Is that so?” Pasch said in a perfunctory reply. His eyes kept drifting to her as if he had more to say.

Well, of course my sixteen-year-old self would resemble my ten-year-old body.

Vivi didn’t manipulate Yuki’s appearance to look like a completely different person. Aside from changing her eye color and height, not much differed from how she would have looked if she had simply aged six years.

“...Do you have a younger sister?”

“No...I don’t.”

“I see.”

He's like a completely different person. He's not showing any of the blatant malice he treated me with in the tower.

"Miss Yuki, this gentleman is—" the headmaster started.

"Pasch. I occasionally stay here. I'll be here for a few days this time. I hope we can get along."

He stays here? The second prince of a country as big as Maruk? And the way he's talking...he's clearly trying to hide his status. Why is a Maruk prince staying at one of Rvydom's orphanages? Several questions raced through her mind, but she couldn't bring herself to give more than a perfunctory reply.

"Pasch! Let's play!" Rita said, returning from putting away the clothes to grab Pasch's hand.

"Sure, let's do that. Are the others in the big room right now?"

"Yeah!" Rita held her arms out in a bid to be picked up. Pasch gave in to her wishes and lifted her into his arms.

"All right, Headmaster, please take care of what we discussed."

"Very well. I shall."

With Rita in his arms, Pasch looked from the headmaster to Yuki before leaving the room. The room suddenly felt larger with him gone. And Yuki could finally breathe again.

I had the same impression in the tower, but he's someone with a presence you can't ignore. Yuki straightened out the laundry crumpled under her grip and placed it in the cupboard.

THE headmaster summoned Yuki to his office later that day. "Miss Yuki, I need to speak with you."

It didn't take much to realize he wanted to talk about Pasch. No doubt he caught on to the tension between them.

"What about?"

He stood and straightened his posture. "Do you hate Maruk, Miss Yuki?"

“...Excuse me?” she squeaked, his question not the one she expected. “Ah, s-sorry. Umm, hate is...”

The memories of the time she spent in Maruk came rushing back to her. Invading the prison tower with Luca, breaking Dante and Galian out of the underground prison and rescuing them. Running from Luca only to watch a boy be slaughtered by Orga and find herself a prisoner to be burned and used for his schemes. Then she met Padi and found herself propped up on a stake, its flames licking at her legs. Remembering the place where she was to be executed still caused her to tremble with unthinkable fear and to grip at the now invisible seal seared into her chest as it groaned with a piercing ache.

“I do not hate Maruk,” she confessed.

“Why not?”

Why? Because the only reason they executed me was because of that vulgar older brother’s machinations. Her thoughts stopped there as she realized there was something faulty with her thinking. *Rvydom was at war with Maruk. They conscripted their citizens and sent them off to war.*

The war between Rvydom and Maruk brought about the loss of friends, family, and loved ones for many people. People who were weighed down with more sorrow than they could bear still despaired in large numbers across Aridol even after the war.

Yuki felt terrible. “I...believe it is because I haven’t experienced the war between Maruk and Rvydom.”

The headmaster didn’t hide his shock at her confession. Aridol was embroiled in enough wars and skirmishes no child alive today knew anything but war.

“I recently came from a faraway place—another country. There hasn’t been a war for decades where I come from. I’m traveling with Vigo and Selena to increase my knowledge of this land.”

I don’t think I’m lying.

A quiet smile touched his face. “Is that so? Lord Pasch...Lord Paschwell was placed in charge as the governor of Rvydom once it was absorbed into Maruk.”

Yuki was shocked a boy who didn't look much older than her served in such an important position. *Padi said he governed Cele too. Is it a prince thing?* She remembered the young man with long pale-blue hair and icy-blue eyes as clear as glass.

"As you would expect, the scars of war have left deep-rooted hatred. Most people do not take fondly to Lord Paschwell at first."

"I don't see why they would..."

Even with how peaceful Japan was, wars still erupted across different regions on Earth. A long time was necessary for things to recoup to even half of what they were in prewar days. People couldn't travel to some regions because it still wasn't safe.

"Despite the hatred he receives, Lord Paschwell has taken pity on the people of Rvydom. He has done much in the way of charity for us. This orphanage is but one example. Lord Paschwell is the one who has supported and supplied us with the necessary food and equipment we need."

"He...has?" Yuki choked. The man who told her—someone he thought was but a child—to die for Rvydom, was a benefactor of orphanages? What irony.

"I don't mean to mislead you into thinking no one has been against Lord Paschwell... Quite the opposite really. Everyone hated him. His country invaded the peaceful land of Rvydom and mocks us by offering alms? Are they trying to further squash our pride by waving what we once had back in our faces?" the headmaster spat and continued as if something bitter was on his tongue, "But, regardless of how the people disparage him, he frequently visits us, bringing food and supplies. He is kind to our children. And still apologizes fervently for not being able to do more for us..."

Though she tried, Yuki couldn't imagine his efforts on behalf of the people of Rvydom. But the headmaster's voice quivered from reliving Pasch's consideration for them.

"When Rvydom lost the war, Lord Paschwell hadn't even reached his seventh year. Yet after all his attempts, he wiggled his way in and won our acceptance. It is not just this orphanage that feels this way either. All the citizens of Rvydom have come to support and back him. So please do not loath him—"

Stop. Please stop it. Yuki begged with her eyes.

“I’ll try...” she barely managed to squeeze out as her throat constricted around the words. Panic and confusion fought for dominion over her emotions. After all he had done to her, she had to hear others praise her executioner? The man whose daily mantra was telling her to die? That same man was helping Rvydom?

“What a relief to hear. That is all I wanted to say. I have other business to attend to, so if you will excuse me here,” the headmaster said, nodding to her as he slipped out the door behind her. If it wasn’t just her imagination, he seemed to be in high spirits.

Left all alone in the office, Yuki stood unmoving.

“...Why?”

Why had he been so cruel to her? Why were people singing his praises now? Why did she have to see him again and relive those nightmarish days?

In the distance what sounded like laughter echoed.

Chapter 17

“I’LL be staying here.”

Just as Pasch said, he stayed at the orphanage and became another person Yuki had to look after. Aside from cooking for him and doing his laundry, he didn’t add too much to her list of chores. If anything, he actually helped out by playing with the children while she set about cleaning. During his frequent trips to the orphanage, he had captured the hearts of the children.

“Hey! It’s wasteful to leave food behind! Eat it all.”

“Don’t wanna! If it’s a waste, you should eat it, Pasch!”

“You little twerp!”

The boy stuck out his tongue. Pasch smacked him on the head and forced a roll of bread into his mouth, clearly blending into the rhythm of the orphanage.

He didn’t hold back his sharp retorts, but he also didn’t complain about looking after others. The way he interacted with the kids resonated with what she saw of him locked on the top floor of that dreaded tower.

Maybe the reason he was good at taking care of me was because he was used to coming here.

Yuki couldn’t keep her eyes off Pasch since the day he arrived at the orphanage.

“What’s this, my sweet little Yuki? Has he caught your eye? Hmm?” teased a sharp-eyed Selena.

“Not in the slightest.”

Yuki battled with why she always found her eyes drifting to him. Without a doubt, he was the one and same person who pronounced she be burned alive for her country, which wasn’t even hers.

I don’t understand him. For just what purpose is he staying at this orphanage

playing with children? He's even hiding his status as prince.

The headmaster appeared to be the only one who knew the truth about him. Otherwise, the children wouldn't dare to carelessly call him simply Pasch and hang all over him.

"Well, despite his cool appearance, he's got a knack for looking after people like a nice older brother. I heard he's the son of the orphanage's patron."

"Heh. Really now..."

"Yuki, why don't you set your sights on him? Ah, but you already have a Knight attached to you, huh?" Selena grinned, sending patches of red to Yuki's cheeks.

"Yes, and he is by far the better man! Now, stop bringing that up already, Selena!"

"Why should I? It's fun!" Selena chuckled and ruffled Yuki's hair.

Yuki sullenly glared at her and puffed out her cheeks. Suddenly, she felt eyes burrowing into her back. She glanced over her shoulder. Pasch intently studied her every move. When their eyes met, he quickly turned away.

"...Perhaps he's not as disinterested as he might seem," Selena muttered beside Yuki, earning another pointed glare.

WORD about Chiruka's deteriorating condition came from Vigo after the children were put to sleep. She had fully lost consciousness, entering a comatose state. Living on an opposite nocturnal schedule from the rest, Vigo lethargically ate his meal, his fatigue showing. Selena currently took his place by Chiruka's side while he ate.

"How are the kiddos doing? Are any feeling under the weather or showing signs of illness?"

"They seem fine to me. Everyone has been in high spirits since Pasch came."

"I just hope this isn't their incubation period."

"...Yeah."

The dining hall was empty except for Yuki and Vigo, making it hard to believe only a few hours ago Yuki had to raise her voice to hold a conversation over the chattering children.

“...This is a dangerous time. Six days have passed since the fever first took her. It wouldn’t be strange for the other children to start feeling it soon.”

Yuki could only watch as he tiredly sighed and ran a hand down his face. “The headmaster is at the greatest risk of infection and the one we need most protected. The elderly don’t have enough resistance to recover and even if they do, they don’t have the stamina to heal afterwards.” Vigo’s expression twisted under his hand. “The children still have a chance. The symptoms don’t mutate as much in infected children.”

Less serious symptoms in children sounds like the mumps. Is the Ten Day Fever similar to the mumps?

“Tonight is most likely going to be her greatest battle. As long as she regains consciousness at the end...”

She’ll be cured if she regains consciousness... Is tonight the precipice for her?

Vigo dropped his hand and looked at the speechless Yuki. “Sorry. I want to get you to Adolunde as soon as I can, but I just can’t abandon a patient.”

She frantically shook her head. “Don’t be sorry! I want her to get well soon too. It’s only natural for a doctor to put his patient before other concerns. You don’t have to worry about me.” She hid her lie behind a fake smile.

Getting to Adolunde as soon as she could was her priority. But it wasn’t a lie she worried about Chiruka.

Vigo smiled and ruffled her hair in circles. “You’re just like Rifaenotis said.”

“What did he say?”

“That you are a good girl who earnestly tries her best,” Vigo said, rising to his feet.

“Ah, Vigo!” He stopped walking toward the door to look back at her. “Aren’t you tired too? Don’t push yourself past your limits. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help.”

“Thanks,” he answered and left the room.

YUKI finished cleaning up and did a routine check around the rooms to lock the doors and windows. The children were fast asleep. She walked over to one of the windows to close and lock it. Through the window she caught sight of someone standing outside beside the ginormous, old tree growing in front of the orphanage.

Prince Pasch.

Pasch stood alone in the moon-illuminated garden. It may have been early summer, but the nights were still cold. Yet he was dressed lightly.

What is he doing?

A heartrending aura stemmed from his forlorn back. Yuki had no idea how his mind worked. Why did he pressure Yuki to die? Why did he drug a mere child and lead her to the stake when he could laugh and play with children so easily? Why did he frequently visit the orphanage when everyone despised him?

Will he tell me if I ask?

Would he answer her? Yuki grabbed a blanket and headed for the entrance.

Chapter 18

PASCH stood in the same position Yuki saw him in through the window. A subtle energy lingered about the moonlit woods, engendering an aura that screamed not to approach. The ginormous tree looming over Pasch swayed loudly in the wind, its branches scratching against each other.

“...What are you looking at?” Yuki asked quietly as she cautiously approached him.

Startled, he spun around wide eyed. A relieved sigh left him upon confirming it was Yuki. “What the heck? Where did you come from?”

“Sorry for surprising you.”

“Nah, you didn’t.”

Silence fell between them as neither moved to say more.

What should I talk about?

Despite all her courage and ability to associate with him normally, the fear of what he did burned like molten rock deep within her core. The hatred in his ultramarine eyes as he cursed her and told her to die repeatedly until he dragged her to the stake still haunted her dreams. The source of her nightmares outside of Orga stood right beside her now.

“...I was wondering where they go.”

“Where who goes?” Yuki asked, his words surprising her.

“I was contemplating where people go when they die. Foolish, right?” he said sardonically. “Even if I find the answer, it’s not like I can do anything for those who have died.”

He glanced at Yuki and muttered, “You look alike.... A child who died recently—no—a child I killed looked a lot like you. I can’t really put my finger on why. Maybe it’s the aura around you?” Pain twisted his expression. The child he

spoke of was Yuki herself.

What does he mean he killed me?

Pasch hadn't killed her though he dragged her to the stake to be executed. Vivi had rescued her and handled the rest. So why did he think he killed her? Yuki's heart pounded painfully in her ears; her hands coated with sweat at the memory.

"She really was just a child. Didn't know anything more than the brats here. The only difference between her and them was her audacity and obstinacy."

Then why?

"...Why did you kill her?" The words were out Yuki's mouth before she could take them back. Pasch's head jerked toward her.

Fury took over his features as he glared at her and weakly groaned, "The war was supposed to end with her death."

He's saying it again.

Die for your country. Die for your people. Those were the words he spat at her in the tower. But in all her days confined to the tower waiting for death, not once had she come to an answer of how her death would save anyone.

"The war will end with a child's death?"

"It was supposed to! Because she was the sole...!" Pasch trailed off, not wanting to finish.

Should Japan go to war again, could it be brought to an end with someone's death? Maybe the emperor's or the prime minister's would hold some value, but an unrelated civilian? A child's? There's a reason they didn't kill the emperor in the last major war.

I was supposed to be killed as the Legendary Witch though. Would the war have actually ended if the Witch died?

Pasch stared at Yuki for a few long minutes before turning his face away. "I was told they would end the war if we killed her."

Who told him?

The first person who came to mind was Luca's older, conniving brother sitting on the throne in Adolunde. With the king stepping down from power, he now held all the power of their kingdom. Orga—the man who captured Yuki, slowly burned a flower into her chest with a hot iron rod, and put her in the hands of Maruk to be executed. Pain seared through her chest. She clenched the blanket wrapped around her shoulders and took slow breaths to stop from having a panic attack.

“When I first saw you, I thought she had come back to life to exact revenge on me.”

“Revenge?” Her eyes met his. Torment warped his handsome features as a fury close to bloodlust simmered under his ultramarine eyes.

What's wrong?

“Your eyes are just like hers. Well, granted the color is drastically different, but the iris is similar and you share the same unique aura.”

Pasch suddenly grabbed her hand and yanked her with his full force.

“...Ow!”

Her shoulder banged against the tree trunk several times her size. As soon as pain registered in her, his threatening eyes locked on hers and his other arm reached out to seize her. Wanting to escape, she stepped back, but the thick tree trunk dug into her back, sealing her escape. A hand placed on each side of her face stopped her struggle to get away before it was too late. Inevitably, their position forced them to lock eyes.



“Those are the eyes. That’s the face that wordlessly blames me. Who are you?”

Vivi’s curse had turned her eyes from violet to black. How could he see through it?

“I am...Yuki. A woman traveling with the doctor Vigo and his Knight,” she squeezed out. She didn’t understand what was going on, but firmly stared back. The beastly glint in his eyes carefully watched Yuki like a predator assessing his prey.

“The brat I killed had the same name.”

Yuki feigned ignorance and countered him with indifference, “Is that so? Aren’t you just confusing us because we share the same name?”

“Don’t screw around! You came to kill me, didn’t you?! I berated you into dying for the country and then had you executed! Yet nothing has changed! The war didn’t end as promised! You must despise me! Aren’t you full of hatred for the man who killed you?!” he shouted.

Yuki flinched. She could only watch on as he painfully yelled at her. Wasn’t he the one who hated her? He kept telling her to die. He drugged her and brought her to the stake. Why then, did regret ooze from his every word?

“What did you come here for? I know you hate me!” The foul words he flung at her didn’t match his expression. The pathetic desperation warping his face stung at her heart—she pitied the man who told her to die. “What did you come for...?”

The ferocity he once had left, and only a plea of desperation remained. “Didn’t you come to kill me? If you want to kill me, then do it.... Don’t take the little ones away in my place. I don’t want to see anyone die anymore.”

His words were like knives thrust into her heart. Tears threatened to spill from her rounded eyes. She finally understood. She understood the inexplicable things that took place in the tower, the meaning behind his words that ignorance is bliss, why he told her to die for her country, and now...why he told her to kill him.

They're important to him. Maruk, Rvydom that has become Maruk's territory, the children in the orphanage. And most likely every citizen in Rvydom.

Realizing his struggle suddenly turned an inhumane monster from her nightmares into a kind young man. Happy that he suffered on her half and didn't just hate her, she stretched out her hands to him as he fought to endure his tumult of feelings and tightly embraced him.

"Thank you!"

"Wha--! Are you doing?!"

Yuki wrapped her arms around his back before he could pull away. He tugged on her arms, but she only tightened her grip.

"Quit it," he breathed beside her ear, but she didn't loosen her grip.

"You're so kind, Pasch!"

She finally understood why everyone called him by a cute nickname instead of his full name. He groaned, but that didn't stop her.

"Don't worry. I'm not the grim reaper. I won't kill anyone! But I'm still happy." Unsure of how to convey the joy she felt, her happiness took the form of a brilliant smile that put the moonlight to shame.

"GAAAH! Let go! What the heck are you doing?!" Taking advantage of the momentary lax in her grip, he pried her arms off him and stared at her in exasperation.

"She's not dead."

"Huh?"

"Like I said, that girl isn't dead. She's alive. She's alive and understands how you feel."

Having been completely defanged by Yuki's behavior, he snorted at her seriousness. "I don't need your pathetic attempt at comfort."

"I'm not trying to comfort you though. It's the truth after all. She understands now that you did everything for your country and because you care for the people. She neither loathes you nor wants to take your life."

“Nobles don’t know anything. They don’t even know it’s a crime not to know. Ignorance is bliss.”

Pasch had said that to her in the tower and Rifaenotis had mirrored his words when he found her in the forest.

I’m glad to have learned the truth and to have gotten rid of a piece of my ignorance, Rifae.

A grin made its way to her face. Nothing left to say, Pasch watched her with a frown. His face said it all—he didn’t believe a single word she said.

“Aw, you don’t believe me, do you? Fine, I’ll come to see you again when I’m back to the way I should be.”

Yes, once I return to my true looks I will tell him again that I’m alive and well. I’m kind of excited to think what expression I’ll get out of him.

“So won’t you tell me your name this time?”

“Back the way you should be? This time?” he asked, suspicious. Despite his doubts, her grin wore him down. With a resigned sigh, he answered, “Mano Paschwell Maruk.”

Chapter 19

PASCH announced his full name at Yuki's request, and his expression immediately soured. Telling her his real name destroyed his attempt at keeping his status as prince a secret. Aridol royalty commonly had their country name as their last name. Just like how Luca's last name was Adolunde.

But Yuki knew he was Padimate's younger brother from the time he visited her in Cele Tower. Lack of surprise or any reaction from her roused Pasch's suspicion.

She laughed to smooth things over, "I-I already knew! I forget how I know, but I think I saw you at a festival one time!" She slipped a lie in, hoping a simple excuse would be harder to doubt. If she told him the truth, she'd be in for the inquisition, which scared her to death.

"You did...?" Just as Yuki thought she could relax, he turned a piercing glare on her. "Don't tell the brats about me." She laughed at his serious plea. "Who knows what will happen if they find out I'm a prince..."

"Ahaha. Good point. You'd better watch out. The girls might want to marry you."

"...You're a strange woman."

"You think so?"

"You're acting the same even though you know I'm a prince."

"Would you prefer me to act formally?" she asked, dropping into a halfhearted curtsy.

"Nah, stay the way you are."

Yuki stifled a laugh behind her hand as she imagined what would happen if Pasch's identity was exposed to the children. The girls would definitely quarrel over who gets to marry him. And the boys would blanch over all the tricks they

had pulled on him.

“Your carelessness...or rather being scatterbrained seems to run in the family, huh?”

Padimate always spilled the soup he brought to her and Pasch thoughtlessly told her his full name.

“You...know my family? My older brother?”

“Um, in a manner of speaking,” she answered. Displeasure instantly flashed in Pasch’s eyes. “Are you on bad terms with Padi?”

“Padi...is it?”

“Aah, sorry. I mean your older brother. His name was too long for me to remember. He told me to call him that.”

“You even got his permission?” Pasch drawled, exasperation coating his voice. “In a sense, you’re amazing for forgetting a royal’s name and calling them by a nickname instead. Are you stupid?”

“How could I remember? He only told me once...and Padi speaks quietly.”

Yuki thought it was the fact she called Padimate by a nickname that upset Pasch, but just bringing up his older brother got an embittered reaction out of him.

“Padimate doesn’t even try to do anything. He just lets the war, our old man, Mother, and Auntie go on as they please without stopping them. He lives in an empty bubble, never taking action. He’s running away from his duties,” Pasch snorted with disdain. “I don’t know what that Witch said to him, but ever since he’s become like a doll.”

“Witch?” Yuki repeated, getting a surprised reaction out of Pasch.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know about the Witch?”

“I know more than I would like to about Witches,” she grumbled.

“There’s a pretty famous rumor going around about a Witch cursing him.”

“What? He was cursed?!”

Come to think of it, Vivi mentioned something about Witches enjoying cursing

people. Depending on how I look at it, her altering my appearance could be a curse too...

“What kind of curse is it?”

“He doesn’t really know what it entails, but one day he just completely lost the ability to express himself.”

He can’t express himself? Yuki’s thoughts instantly went to the glass-like quality of his light-blue eyes. His vacant expression hindered any attempts at trying to figure out what he was thinking. *I have to admit I never really saw more than one or two expressions from him. Actually, thinking back on it, his eyes and lips moved ever so slightly, but never did they shift into a smile or waver with emotion. Even when I tried to jump from the balcony...he was unfazed. I thought that was just his personality, not a Witch’s curse...*

“...Tell me, are you some provincial noble?” Pasch asked, assessing her looks and mannerisms.

“Excuse me? Like I told you before, I’m no noble,” Yuki croaked several pitches higher than she meant to. The question reminded her of how he was convinced she was a noble in the tower.

“It’s one thing for you to have seen me somewhere at some point, but my older brother hasn’t stepped into the public eye for several years now. You not only know him, but are intimate enough to call him by his nickname. Let’s not forget how little common sense you have too. Someone who’s ignorant and knows a prince has to be a noble,” Pasch deduced.

I’m on the hook here!

“Aha...hahaha. I just happened to be in his care for a period of time in the past! Plus, I’m no noblewoman. I was shocked to learn he was a prince after the fact,” Yuki explained, mixing lies with the truth. Not like she was going to tell Pasch she was in Padi’s care after he watched her get burned alive by Orga and kept her locked in a prison tower.

“Aaah. Well, he does have a terrible habit of aimlessly wandering around.... He seriously needs to stay still and protect his land. Geez, I want to hit him sometimes. The idiot is the governor of Cele! He needs to act like it!” Pasch

prattled on, not the least suspicious of how Yuki encountered Padimate.

Padimate possessed the clearest blue eyes Yuki had ever seen. They were bewitchingly beautiful. The last place she saw him was the execution platform. The vacant look in those eyes as he stoically asked her if she had any final words before they burned her alive were as vivid in her memories as the flames licking at her feet. Surprise had him blinking several times when she asked if everyone would become happy when they killed her.

Did the Witch's curse strip him of all emotion? Even though the ghost of an expression touched his blank face at times? Wasn't that a sign he still felt something?

"...Anybody home?" Pasch asked, waving his hand in front of her face. Her sudden depression confused him.

"I said some terrible things to Padi when we parted," she admitted.

Regardless of whether he felt things the same way other people did, Yuki didn't want to hurt him. Just remembering the look on his face twisted her stomach with guilt. What did he think after being ripped into by the girl he sent to be burned alive?

"I want to apologize, but I doubt I'll ever run across him again. He's Cele's governor, right? I can't speak for what will happen with his wandering habits, but it seems unlikely to happen again. I wanted to apologize to him one last time," she muttered.

A large hand plopped on her head and ruffled her hair in an awkward attempt at comforting her. "In that case, I'll set it up so you can meet him."

"Why?" His hand blocked her view of him, but the side of his face she could see around the corner was a little red.

"I said some terrible things to you too. I'll do it as an apology and as thanks," Pasch said, flashing a bashful smile. He adjusted the blanket that had slipped down her shoulders when she hugged him.

"As thanks for what? I didn't do anything—"

"It's fine. I won't be satisfied unless I make it up to you. Well, I can't do

anything for anyone unless I can return to Maruk.”

“...I’m sorry.”

War and disease blocked his passage home. This was a situation between him and his country, and not one Yuki had any business prying into.

“Sorry for scaring you.”

“Don’t be. I should also, uh, apologize for suddenly hugging you. Sorry.” Yuki glanced up at him to gauge how troubled he was by her sudden outburst.

“N-No need. Your hug was on the same level as the kids’.”

“Oh, I guess it was,” Yuki giggled.

“Weird woman,” he sighed, not even realizing his heart raced faster with her than when the children hugged him. “Anyway, where are you going from here?”

“Hm? When we leave, we’ll travel around Rvydom with medicine and make our final stop in Adolunde.”

“You’re going to Adolunde?” The corner of Pasch’s eye twitched and he furrowed his brow.

“Yeah?”

Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned our destination.

They were currently in Rvydom, but Pasch’s kingdom was at war with Adolunde.

“Don’t worry, I don’t mind,” Pasch reassured, sensing her concern. “The thing is, Adolunde is in bad shape right now. If you’re a noble, don’t get in too deep. The danger lies beyond bad parts of town.”

“How many times must I insist I’m not a noble before you believe me? What’s all the fuss in Adolunde over?”

“You haven’t figured it out? One of Adolunde’s princes died of the Ten Day Fever.”

“I know.”

“Do you know how he contracted the illness? The royal castle should be the

safest place in the kingdom. All the servants would keep themselves clean and stay away from illness, and the royal doctors have to be the best in the land.”

That makes sense. But mistakes happen, right?

“There’s a very high chance someone intentionally infected him. Not much anyone can do if a prince dies of an illness other than lament the death.”

Yuki’s eyes rounded at the truth she never considered. “Are you implying someone didn’t think highly of the third prince so they infected him?”

“Doesn’t it sound more plausible than only one person in the entire castle contracting the Ten Day Fever and dying? If it was inside the castle naturally, others should be sick too. There is no solid evidence of course, but the rumor is there.”

...If true, things are taking a preposterous turn. Yuki found herself both in awe and dread of the young man who spoke casually about political subterfuge. Why is everything such a mess in this world? I have no idea what facts are true. I guess this is why Rifae and other information brokers exist.

Had even Pasch found his life in danger because of who he was?

I’m sure he has. He’s a prince. Even Luca’s life has been a target.

Yuki thought back to the countries in her world and the history of royalty fighting brutally for the right to ascend the throne. Once again, she was amazed by the burdens Pasch and Luca carried with them at their age.

“...It’s complicated, huh?” she offered.

“It is. I’d be happy living like I am here—playing with children, tilling the fields to obtain the day’s food, and working for a living,” Pasch confessed, his hair swaying in the strong breeze.

“I see. So that’s why you keep coming back here.”

“...I guess so. You’d better be careful too. Adolunde has the worst reports of the Ten Day Fever.”

“Yeah. But are you okay, Pasch? Chiruka has it bad. Should you even be in the same building as her?”

“...Does Chiruka have it that bad?”

“Vigo said tonight is the final battle.”

“Did he?”

They stopped talking. The silence between them was filled in by the sound of the wind and trees. How long had they been outside chatting for? The chilly air had swept the heat from her skin. The pale gibbous moon illuminated the black clouds floating by it. Stars intermittently shone in gaps between the clouds.

“There’s a theory in my land that you become a star,” Yuki muttered, breaking the silence.

“...A star?”

“The answer to your first question about where people go when they die.”

“Aah.”

“It’s said they become stars and watch over their loved ones,” she explained, looking up at the night sky. Pasch followed suit.

“...A lot of people are watching out for us then.”

“Doesn’t it make it harder to do something bad?”

“You’ve got a point there.”

They shared a smile that quickly faded when a shout pierced the still night.
“Don’t go!”

The shout came from the orphanage’s second-story where Chiruka slept. Where could she go in her condition, but death?

“...!”

Pasch bolted for the orphanage.

“Ah! Wait! Don’t go there!”

He can’t go in there!

Pasch hadn’t seen Chiruka once since he came to the orphanage.

He’ll get infected!

Yuki raced after him. The blanket fell behind her and fluttered to the ground.

Chapter 20

WHETHER it was his longer legs or the sheer difference in their physical stamina, Yuki utterly failed to keep up with Pasch. By the time she caught up to him, his hand was already turning the doorknob.

“Don’t!”

Did her shout come before he opened the door or too late? Either way, he flung the door open and dashed inside.

“Pasch!” Yuki ran in after him.

Vigo was in the middle of performing a cardiac massage on Chiruka as she lay limp in her bed.

“Don’t go! Come back to us!” he pleaded, not even noticing Yuki and Pasch.

All vestiges of the girl Yuki met on the first day were gone. Red pockmarks covered her entire body, dyeing her skin an oozy red. White pus seeped from under the hives of various sizes. Her unkempt hair stuck to the sweat trickling down her emaciated face. What Yuki had heard about the Ten Day Fever didn’t prepare her for what she saw.

“Chiruka!” Pasch knelt beside her bed and held her pock covered hand, careful not to pop the swollen pustules.

This can’t be happening... Yuki felt as if she were in the middle of a climatic TV soap opera. It all felt so surreal, like a fictional story encroaching on her reality.

“You can’t do this, Chiruka...” Yuki staggered over to her bedside. She carefully captured the hand that flung in the air reflexively with Vigo’s CPR, and brought it to her forehead in prayer. “You can’t die, Chiruka.”

Everyone is waiting for you to get better. They are waiting for you to come back to them.

Everyone around Yuki shouted and cried out Chiruka’s name. Their desperate

pleas at her sickbed lacked any sense of reality. It was as if Yuki were stuck in one of her nightmares.

Chiruka, hurry back to us. Show us how healthy you can be. Yuki kept praying.

Before long, Chiruka's arm stopped moving with Vigo's CPR. Yuki opened her eyes and saw Vigo pressing his ear against Chiruka's chest.

"All right!" Vigo bit out, the first signs of relief on his face for days—an instant sign Chiruka's pulse came back.

"Chiruka! Chiruka!" Pasch called out over and over again, clenching the opposite hand from Yuki. Chiruka partially opened her crusted eyes. "Chiruka!"

Broadly grinning, Pasch pushed the hair back from her face and stroked the side of her cheek. "You did real great, Chiruka."

"...sch..."

"Don't talk. Take this time to rest up. Okay?" he affectionately spoke to her. She nodded slowly and fell into a peaceful sleep.

"Looks like she's going to be okay," Vigo assessed, letting out a long, relieved sigh with a look of utter exhaustion coloring his features.

"Good work, Vigo," Yuki congratulated. Vigo's brow and shirt were stained with sweat. Dark bags hung under his bloodshot eyes. "Will Chiruka get better now?"

"At this point it's up to her system to handle the rest, but she's past the worst of it." The tension quickly left Yuki, leaving her smiling. "So? Why are you here?"

"Why?"

Chiruka made it through the most dangerous part. Still smiling, Yuki looked up at Vigo whose expression was stern.

"You remember I warned you not to come in this room because you might contract the same sickness, yeah?"

"...I do."

"You aren't the exception either, boy. Why did you come here?" Vigo clipped,

turning his scolding onto Pasch.

“I came without thinking when I heard you shout for Chiruka.”

“And then what? You came to cheer us on?” Vigo asked, turning to Yuki. She nodded. “Are you a fool?! What are you going to do if you get infected because of this?!”

Selena moved from her fixed position at the wall in the back of the room to stop Vigo from losing it. “Now, now. All that ends well is well, right? You’re tired, Vigo. Don’t take out your pent-up frustration on Yuki.”

She placed her hands on his shoulders and began massaging. “Yuki is old enough to know her actions have consequences. But her worry got the best of her, as it does when people are around the sick. Look at it this way: there’s a chance Chiruka returned to us because they were here calling for her.”

Massaging Vigo’s shoulders, Selena turned to where Yuki stood. “You two need to drink the medicine later. It’ll help act as a preventive,” she said with a wink.

A heavy sigh escaped Vigo’s lips in resignation. “If you realize what you’ve done, hurry out of here. Same goes for you, boy.”

Pasch hadn’t stopped stroking Chiruka’s hair and stood regretfully at Vigo’s command. “You have my gratitude for saving her,” he thanked, bowing his head.

“I’ve done nothing deserving of your thanks, boy. I did my job.”

“Even so, thank you.”

Pasch earned a grin and ruffling of his hair for his persistence. “If you feel that way, continue to do good by this orphanage,” Vigo said knowingly.

“I will. I’ll do my best by it.”

“I’ll hold you to your words. All right, get out of my patient’s room unless you want to become one.” Vigo shooed them out the door.

Yuki and Pasch left the room, reflecting on the still lingering adrenaline and joy over what transpired.

CONFIRMING the door firmly shut behind the two teenagers, Vigo walked back to Chiruka's bed. The tranquility on her face as she slept would make any doctor doubt only minutes earlier she had suffered cardiopulmonary arrest.

"...I can only call this one a miracle," he muttered.

"Or it may have been the power of their loving shouts for her?" Selena joked, but he saw the shadow of seriousness lingering in her face.

He placed his hand on Chiruka's cheek and measured the temperature of her throat. The discolored scabs left by the pocks peeled off at his touch.

"...?!" He pulled his hand back. New, healthy skin peeked out underneath where the scabs came off. "Impossible. I don't believe it." Carefully touching her cheeks in different places easily pulled off the scabs like dead skin. "How can the pocks be healed already?"

The pocks and hives generally took several days to discolor into scabs that took another few days to fall off. The scabs needed to be carefully removed and treated to not leave scars or cause further infection. Sometimes the healing process was as dangerous as the sickness. How could the pocks have already turned to scabs that came off without surgical tools and already have healthy skin underneath? The skin rarely returned to being as healthy as it was before the Ten Day Fever.

"What's wrong?"

Vigo rubbed Chiruka's cheek again to show Selena. The silky smooth skin under the scabs rendered her speechless. Even with his hand on her cheek, he didn't feel the burning heat of her high temperature only minutes prior. Her body had returned to a healthy condition.

"Does the power of love have such an amazing effect normally? I wonder if it was the boy's doing," Selena mused, rubbing the scabs off Chiruka's arm to reveal the same healthy skin.

"Who knows? If love could heal all illness, few humans would die." Vigo walked away from the bed and looked out the window. The moon dyed the nearby clouds indigo. There was no sunlight, yet a bright light hit his eyes. Still

facing the moon, he closed his eyes. “Selena...did you see it?”

“I saw you happy for the first time in a long time,” she offered.

“Not that. The girl.”

“Which girl?”

She didn't see then.

The girl with white skin, black hair and eyes, with vestiges of innocent youth and ignorance. Out of the corner of his eyes, Vigo had witnessed it—the faint light emitting from Yuki's body as she gripped Chiruka's hand in prayer.

Chapter 21

THE following morning, with Vigo's permission, the children hung out in Chiruka's room all day. They ate sitting on the floor of her room and napped in the same spot, never leaving but to use the restroom. Needing to rest for another two or three days, Chiruka's bed rest orders weren't filled with the expected tedium because of all the boisterous children prattling away in her room. After the first day they took turns visiting in pairs to keep from putting too much strain on her. The majority of scabs had peeled off, leaving no trace of the dying girl covered in red, oozing pustules the day before.

"I'm so relieved to see her doing well," Yuki said to Selena as they stood in the back of Chiruka's room watching her read a story to the kids sitting on and around her bed.

"She miraculously recovered from the brink of death. And her recovery rate from there has been insane."

"Yeah, it really is amazing.... I wonder if it's thanks to everyone praying for her to get better."

"It very well could be."

Yuki suddenly realized Vigo was missing from the heartwarming scene in front of them. "Oh, where's Vigo?"

"I think he's still asleep..."

The door opened just after Selena spoke. Vigo stood in the doorway, his stubble looking more like a full beard with how thick it had grown without him maintaining it. He rubbed a hand over his still bloodshot eyes.

"Oh, good morning, sleepyhead."

Vigo grunted a reply and walked over to Chiruka. He asked her several questions about how she was feeling, took her temperature, and returned to where Yuki and Selena stood by the door.

“Apparently there’s another person infected not too far from here. I’m going to check on them. I’ll be back by nightfall,” he said briefly. Selena nodded, their bond not needing further words. Vigo turned his eyes on Yuki’s face and studied her. “Yuki, nothing wrong with you?”

“Why?”

“You look pale.” He put his thumb under her eye and pulled down the bottom eyelid.

He really is a doctor.

The truth was she had been feeling a little sick since the prior night. A heavy weight sat on her limbs and she kept having anemic spells. She didn’t think she let it show enough for anyone to notice though.

“Yeah, I feel a little out of it.”

“You do? Keep your activity to a minimum today then.” He waited for her to nod before handing her a glass medicine vial the size of his hand.

“...What is this?”

“Sorry to ask this of you when you aren’t feeling well, but can you pray for the recipient of this medicine to get well soon? Your prayers seem to have a good effect.”

“They do? I-I guess I can then.”

How do I pray for someone I don’t know? Yuki wrapped both hands around the vial and held it to her heart. *Get better soon with this medicine and be cured.*

She put her heart into it and returned the vial to Vigo.

“Thanks. Lie down if you don’t feel good,” he urged, patting Yuki roughly on the head before walking out the door.

“...You’re incredible, Yuki,” Selena gawked.

“What? Where did that come from?”

“Nowhere. Don’t mind me. Oh yeah, looks like we’ll be leaving here tomorrow morning. Be sure to pack up. Go to sleep after you finish packing if you aren’t

feeling well.”

“O-Okay...”

I need to work twice as hard at it without Tita to help! Yuki clenched her fists, readying for the battle that came with every departure—packing.

DESPITE warnings from Selena and Vigo not to overexert herself, Yuki felt it was a waste to rest when they were going to leave tomorrow and decided to play with the children after she finished packing her meager belongings. As long as the children were cooped up inside the orphanage they would make their way to Chiruka’s room, disrupting her much-needed rest, so Yuki brought them out to the nearby forest to have lunch.

The children were fast asleep under the rustling treetops. The ruckus they caused earlier had drowned out the sound of the wind and leaves. Yuki and Pasch had split up to play different games with different groups of children and found themselves yanked from one side of the play area to the other and passed around like a favorite toy. After playing to their heart’s content, their energy switch snapped off and child after child curled up to sleep until finally the forest regained its former quiet.

Toys they brought from the orphanage were strewn across the ground. Shovels and buckets lay forgotten next to castles built out of mud. Straw dolls were tightly grasped in their owner’s hands, while toy carriages found themselves hidden behind a gnarled tree.

Yuki picked up the toys without complaint as she stole a look at the sleeping children. The younger ones sucked on their thumbs and used the older ones as pillows.

“I feel like we just got sucked into a whirlwind of play only to be spit out by it after it leaves,” Yuki remarked, rubbing the dirt off a doll’s face.

Pasch looked up from where he bent down to dislodge a toy from a hole in the tree trunk and strained a smile. “Yeah. It’s been a while since I last moved around this much.”

“Oh? Do princes not exercise? Do you only study or something?”

“No, no. We learn how to fight with the sword too. We have to be able to protect ourselves when we find we’re in a situation without a guard or have to take care of things on our own. But I haven’t moved around much since coming here,” Pasch explained, stretching his hands over his head under the afternoon sun.

Sounds tough to be a prince.

“Did you hate training?”

“Nah. I actually enjoyed it. What I hate is studying,” he admitted with a smile, bringing out a smile in Yuki too. His smile suddenly faded. “You know the best part about becoming strong? I was able to beat some sense into the shitty nobles who flattered me to my face but spread rumors behind my back.”

Yuki wasn’t expecting such an admission. She had the impression nobility treasured the royal family.

But I guess Pasch always had a thing against the nobility.

She recalled what he said to her in the tower when he thought she was a nobleman’s daughter. Pasch and nobles were an incompatible pairing apparently. Laughter escaped her as she imagined him laughing over the nobles groveling on the ground before him after he won the battle.

I bet he laughed harder than any other point in his life.

“It was loads of fun seeing the look on their faces after they lost when they were the ones who underestimated and mocked me. Humiliation was written all over their plump faces.”

“Ahaha, you’ve got a terrible personality.”

“Obviously. No one could survive in the palace if they had a happy-go-lucky personality like you.”

“You think so...? For your information, I’m not happy all the time,” she demurred as she folded up the cloth napkins sitting on the blanket they spread out for their picnic lunch.

“You only continue to confirm how strange of a woman you are.”

“Hey!” she protested and looked up from the napkin at Pasch kneeling on the

blanket across from her.

“You aren’t ingratiating like the palace royals. Nor do you bow to me, just like the people of Rvydom don’t. You seriously are a strange woman.”

“What reason do I have to ingratiate myself to you, Pasch? I’m not obligated to bow to you either,” Yuki stated matter-of-factly and suddenly realized he had been helping her clean up all this time. “Thank you for helping me pick things up,” she said, bowing her head to him.

An amused laugh escaped him. “Is that where you bow to me?”

“Now is the only thing worth bowing to you for,” she replied honestly as she put the utensils into another bag. A small sneeze came from where Rita slept; she was curled in a ball to warm herself from the cold.

“The wind has gotten chilly.” Yuki pulled a blanket out of the bag she brought and spread it over Rita and the kids sleeping beside her. She gently pulled their arms from under the blanket and put them on top of it to keep the wind from blowing the blanket off them. Once she saw their expressions relax from the warmth, she got to her feet.

Ah!

The blood rushed from her brain and numbness took over her senses. Buzzing filled her ears and white blurred her vision. Anemia—the second it clicked, she had already lost her sense of balance and her feet became unreliable as the world spun around her.

Strength left her body and as she was about to fall backward, a hand grabbed her right hand and pulled her upright. Searching through her spinning sight she caught a glance of ultramarine hair swaying next to her. Shutting her eyes to keep the spinning from making her nauseous, she clung to what supported her.

“Wh-What’s wrong with you?” Pasch asked, panic causing him to stammer.

“Ah, sorry. Anemic,” she barely answered through the cloud numbing her brain to reassure the panicked voice. Depending on the arm supporting her, she let her legs go slack—the dizziness zapped her control of her limp limbs.

I’m an idiot. Vigo told her she looked pale. Selena said she should rest. *I’m*

such an idiot.

The ground made contact with her knees, but it didn't hurt because of the slow descent. Her head didn't loll back to the ground because it hit Pasch's broad chest, and he had his hands around her arms holding her upright.

"Hey! O-Oi! Wh-What should I do for you?!" he asked, panic mounting.

"Mn..." Even as she held on to her consciousness, the numbness blaring through her brain didn't go away as it extended its reach to her toes. Dizziness shook everything. "Let me sleep."

He must have heard the soft words she mumbled, because something touched her under the armpit. Warmth pressed against her back.

"I'm going to drag you," said a voice tickling her ear. With all the strength she could muster, she nodded.

Pasch pulled her back under her armpits, her heels dragging across the leafy dirt. How long did he drag her for? Just when she felt the warmth leave her, she was slowly laid on her side. Rugged and cool terrain pressed against her back under the soft blanket from lunch they hadn't folded yet. He brought her to the blanket instead of letting her fall on the ground.

"A-Are you all right?" Pasch inquired, concern coloring his voice.

"Thank you," she said softly.

It no longer felt like her whole body was going to pivot forward, but the world still spun behind the darkness of her closed eyes.

"I'm okay. My head is still spinning, but I'm conscious," she consoled. Breath from a relieved sigh felt hot against the back of her head.

"Ah, your head. Aren't you supposed to keep your head up when you're anemic?" he asked, gently lifting her head up. It was slowly lowered on top of something soft and warm. She opened her eyes to see Pasch's face directly above her. Even in the haziness, she knew he let her use his lap as a pillow.

"Isn't it more comfortable this way?"

Dazzling sunlight trickled down on them through the verdant leaves.

“It is. Thank you.” The numbness in the center of her brain seemed to subside. The voice she heard over her sounded tender. “Sorry. My head must be heavy.”

“Huh? Nah, not really,” Pasch brusquely brushed off. She giggled at him.

He’s kind, but too awkward to let it be taken as kindness.

“What’s so funny?” he protested, lightly thumping her on the head with the palm of his hand. Gentleness marked even that gesture as he stroked back her hair.

“You’re kind, little Pasch.”

The older children who stayed at the orphanage in the past were the first to call him that. Those children had long since left to face the horrors of war.

“...Don’t call me that. I’m not a kid anymore.”

“Everyone else calls you that.”

“I won’t let the brats get away with it anymore either.”

A futile endeavor. Everyone at the orphanage only knows him as Pasch.

“You’re naïve if you think you can make them stop.”

“...Whatever. Just sleep already. You’re as white as a ghost.” Pasch shaded her face with his hands, obstructing the direct beams of sunlight from infiltrating her eyelids.

“...Yeah,” she muttered and took a deep breath. “Thank you, Paschwell...”

Yuki let the dizziness take her.

Chapter 22

SEVERAL hours after galloping from the orphanage, Vigo dismounted his horse and tied the reins to the tree he sat under. From under his shirt he pulled out an amber crystal the size of his palm and held it over his head. A second later it emitted a faint glow and reflected the mirror image of a person within its swirling depths. Luscious locks of long, deep-green hair swayed in the liquid tendrils. Hearing Vigo's summons, Rifaenotis turned around from the herb shelf in his office and ambled over to the crystal.

"Oh, Vigo, my boy. What's wrong, hon?"

"What's the meaning of this?"

"What's the meaning of what? Can you fill me in before you snap at me?"

Vigo stroked his stubble and sighed. "Who is the girl? *What* is she?"

The smile reflected in the crystal gave way to a serious glint. "Might I ask... what you are referring to?"

"Don't pull your evasive tactics on me. A child at the orphanage was infected with the Ten Day Fever. Her condition was beyond hope. She was on the verge of death. Then the girl you stuck me with came in, took the dying child's hand, and glowed."

Even through the less than perfect image in the crystal, Vigo saw Rifaenotis' eyes widen.

"Immediately after—and I mean immediately—the sick child made a complete recovery. The pocks, the pustules, the scarring, the fever—all of it healed. Side effects that usually take days to weeks to heal, recovered in an instant. I can only think your girl had something to do with this. There's no other explanation for it."

"...I see," Rifaenotis nodded, his momentary surprise replaced with acceptance.

“You know something about this, don’t you? I had to bring her along with me because it was your *request*. Spit out the truth already.”

“You’re the one who happily consented to it, Vigo dear... I didn’t know Yuki possessed such a power either.”

I don’t remember happily consenting to bringing her.

For all he denied knowing about her power, Rifaenotis appeared spitefully calm on the other side of the amber crystal.

“But...I must admit...I’m not surprised,” Rifaenotis confessed mysteriously.

“What are you talking about?”

“I haven’t questioned Yuki about it too much either. This is all just speculation on my half, but...” Rifaenotis trailed off, using that as the preface for the bomb he dropped next, “Yuki is most likely Lord Cahn’s daughter...and Lord Cahn is no longer with us.”

Vigo gaped. “Huh?! Wh-Why didn’t you say anything about something so important?!”

Intense regret assaulted Vigo for allowing Yuki into a room with a patient stricken with the highly contagious Ten Day Fever. Gooseflesh prickled across his skin as thoughts of Yuki contracting the fever flitted across his mind.

“Because you suck at telling lies, Vigo. Just stare into those innocent, round eyes for a second and you’ll spill your guts to her,” Rifaenotis jested. “Yuki doesn’t seem to know anything about who she really is.”

Vigo heaved a loud sigh. “...How could you tell she’s Lord Cahn’s daughter? Her eyes are black.”

“You could say it’s the intuition of a humble vassal.”

Vigo glared at him. “Don’t screw around! That’s not enough to claim she’s his daught—”

“‘If you trust them first, they will come to trust you.’ She said that was a key point in her father’s teaching.” Rifaenotis’ reflection in the crystal quivered with his snicker. “Hence why she quickly got attached to you, Selena, and me... She trusts us so easily...”

The flames of anger swirling inside Vigo were doused by those words.

It's been a long time since I last heard those naïve words.

Hearing the saying his Sovereign shared on a regular basis filled Vigo with curiosity. He couldn't fathom anyone other than his Sovereign spewing such naïve words with conviction.

Is that the basis for his hypothesis? Strangely enough, that specific saying worked in convincing Vigo as well.

"I wasn't sure if she was his biological daughter, but after hearing what you said, the pieces come together."

"...What pieces?"

"You see, Yuki was with the Rose Witch before she met me," Rifaenotis divulged in a whisper, as if their voices could be picked up by someone else.

"Huh? The Rose Witch? You talking about *that* Witch? How? She was—"

"Yes, she was executed by Maruk just recently. Or so the official word says. But Yuki said the Witch is still alive and well. The execution never even took place according to her," Rifaenotis disclosed with a broad smirk. "Do you know what this means? To put it short and sweet, someone pretended to be the Rose Witch. Or they were propped up in place of the Rose Witch and executed. At least that's the illusion cast on the world. But here's the cincher—why were they confused with the Rose Witch in the first place? Her looks aren't common, you know?"

Remarkably, Vigo picked up on what Rifaenotis was implying for once.

"And Yuki has been in direct contact with the Rose Witch."

The Rose Witch—the Witch with violet eyes, also known as the Legendary Witch, famous for appearing in front of people on a whim and playing tricks on them by altering their form and appearance.

"...Yuki's eyes were violet, so the Rose Witch came for her when she was about to be executed in her place. Is this what you're getting at?" Vigo summarized.

"That's what I thought, but..."

Things wouldn't make sense any other way. She's Lord Cahn's daughter and is awakening to some sort of power, which undoubtedly comes from the royal bloodline.

"Yuki doesn't know anything. Moreover, she said she's going to Adolunde. You know how I can't refuse anything Lord Cahn wants, right?"

"Your weakness applies to his daughter as well?"

"Naturally."

"Poor you."

"Anyway, let Yuki do what she wants. And if anything happens, help her out. Also, she doesn't know her own status, so don't flaunt unnecessary formalities with her."

It's back—Rifaenotis' coddling and overindulging habits. Those caretaker-like habits brought a wave of nostalgia. Vigo's cheeks eased into an unintentional smile.

"Sure. I'll help her the best I can within my limits."

"I'm counting on you to care for her. Especially when she often fails to care for herself. I'm going to progress preparations on my side in the meantime."

"Preparations? What for?"

A frosty smile touched Rifaenotis' lips. Vigo knew that smile was the cue not to ask. "Something for you to look forward to in the future, dearie. For now, travel around Rvydom curing people of their Ten Day Fever."

"Fine, fine."

The muffled sound of someone calling Rifaenotis' name from somewhere inside the house on the other side of the crystal reached Vigo's ears.

"I'm on my way, sweetie. Vigo, I have something to inform you of as well."

"What now?"

"Lord Galian escaped Cele Prison Tower. He's yet to be found."

Those words took Vigo off guard. Galian was Cahn's violet Knight and a man possessing physical strength on par with Cahn himself. But rumor had it he was

captured during the war and imprisoned somewhere. Why would he dare an escape now—after Cahn was gone?

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t know the particulars either. Which is why I’m warning you to be on guard.”

Est’s voice calling for Rifaenotis grew louder from the crystal.

“I’ve told you what you wanted to know. Keep Yuki safe and happy,” Rifaenotis instructed and the light went out from the amber crystal.

He told me so much I’m getting a headache trying to organize it. Vigo put his fingertips to his temples and sighed.

“Damn Rifaenotis. He’s entrusted me with an absurd package,” he cursed Rifaenotis and wearily mounted his horse. “Lord Cahn’s daughter? That optimistic, carefree girl?”

Once he mentioned it, her optimism and cheerfulness were a mirror image of her father. Another sigh made its way from Vigo.

“Fret as you may, things will take their own course, huh?” he muttered and kicked his horse into a gallop.

A sudden signal had come. A transmission for anyone nearby—it didn’t matter who as long as they could help. The crystal illuminated in the unforgiving hours of night with only letters and no image, saying, “A girl here has contracted the Ten Day Fever. Someone help her.”

A very simple and unadorned message. The abnormality of how it was sent and the uncharacteristically messy letters made it questionable as a message sent by a Mage. When Vigo replied asking where the girl was, the answer revealed they weren’t too far from the orphanage. Very close considering the distance between the orphanage and Rvydom’s capital city. If they were located in a settlement somewhere, there should have been a doctor in the vicinity yet they chose to send out a message only Mages could pick up on—there had to be more behind their plea.

Vigo's suspicions were proved correct when he arrived at the destination relayed through the crystal.

The rendezvous location was a far too dilapidated building to even call it the house it once was. The miserable, decaying wooden frame looked like an unstable shack now. Whoever he was meeting had chosen to reside in one of the burned down villages; one of the many casualties of war. The settlement built in the ashes of a once vibrant village was as still as death. The sound of hooves brought several men out of the woodwork to stand guard outside with leery faces.

"Are you the doctor?" one of them asked him warily.

"Yeah. Where's the patient?" Vigo dismounted his horse and handed the reins over to one of the scrappy men.

"This way," another man said, raising his hand.

Vigo surveyed the area as he walked through the center of the rundown village. Every person he saw was a burly, muscled man that could have made up a mercenary band, bringing a frown to his face. No women or children were in sight.

...What's going on here?

A village wiped out by the war had become the base of action for nothing but war-hardened men. The men guiding him stopped in front of the building at the innermost section of town—the old mayor's house.

"This is the place."

"Is the patient the only one inside?" Vigo inquired, searching to see if there were any other possible infected around.

The man shook his head. "No. Several bonded Knights are inside as well."

Bonded Knights. Even if they contracted the illness, it wouldn't mutate much beyond a common cold.

"You have my gratitude for showing the way. I'll take care of the rest."

"Please help Lady Tita," the guide said with a bow and returned to the village.

Lady Tita? ...A noblewoman? Why's a noblewoman in a makeshift settlement?
Vigo pondered as he placed his hand on the peeling door. He sharply inhaled at the person he saw when he opened the door.

"I take it you're our doctor?"

Inside was a man in his prime and a young man with darkly tanned skin. And beside them stood the very person Rifaenotis had just warned him about. However, the appearance of the man before him drastically clashed with the person in his memories. Although he had lost a lot of weight and aged dramatically, the sharp glint in his eyes was as bright as ever.

...Lord Galian...

Vigo nearly dropped his medical bag.

Chapter 23

GALIAN Manotant—his name was so famous there wasn't a single person in any military across Aridol who hadn't heard of him. He served as the Knight to Rvydom's former king, Leuco Cahn Rvydom. Legend has it the combination of the God of Annihilation Cahn and the Machine of Calmness Galian was the sole reason the larger kingdom of Maruk struggled to conquer Rvydom before Cahn's disappearance. Furthermore, Galian had been Vigo's teacher and master at one point.

Thunderstruck didn't even begin to describe the shock Vigo felt when Rifaenotis informed him Galian had escaped his imprisonment in Cele. Escaping meant he still hadn't given up or lost the will to fight yet. He hadn't given up on King Cahn or the Kingdom of Rvydom.

Is this what you were referring to, Rifaenotis?

Rifaenotis alluded to his own preparations upon discovering who Yuki was. Undoubtedly his preparations entailed supporting and backing Galian's endeavors. Vigo tightened his grip on the bag he nearly dropped and walked to the bed in the corner of the dusty room.

"Is this child the patient?" he asked, formality stiffening his tone out of respect for the man he once called master.

A young girl no older than sixteen slept under the blankets. Anguish contorted her sleeping face.

She looks about the same age as Yuki.

He stopped at her bedside and briefly examined her. Pocks and pustules had appeared in various locations across her body. A high fever wracked a body already wasting away from a lack of eating.

"S-Say, Doc, will Tita get better?" Nasette grabbed the hem of Vigo's shirt from where he laid at the girl's feet. A ring the same color as Tita's glimmered

on the hand clinging to his shirt.

...Her husband? Debility has gotten him as well.

“Yeah. She’ll be okay. When was the last time she was conscious?” Vigo asked.

“She was conscious until this morning,” Dante answered. Sadness harrowed his features as he gazed at the girl lying in her sickbed. By his forlorn look, Vigo assumed she was his daughter.

Vigo hadn’t noticed him until he opened his mouth, but he knew Dante as well. He was the head of one of Rvydom’s noble families. Rumor had it he pulled in his fair share of military accomplishments during the war as well.

“She has been unconscious since then, I presume? Very well. I understand the situation. I am going to give her the medicine but require boiled water. Can you provide it?”

“S-Sure can. I’ll get it for you right now!” Nasette rushed out of the room. The quiet in his wake was broken only by the labored wheezes coming from the girl.

“...Is this girl his wife?” Vigo asked, checking Tita’s airway for any impediment.

“No, they are both my children,” Dante said with a tender, doleful smile. “I apologize for the misunderstanding. My son is an older brother who has issues separating himself from his younger sister.”

“I should apologize for my rude interpretation of their relationship.” Vigo glanced at Galian who stayed glued to his chair since he entered the room and returned his gaze to Tita. “...She will absolutely get better. After all, this child will receive our goddess’ blessing and not the Witch’s curse.”

Yes, if Yuki’s blessing has the effect I believe it does, all will end well.

Hurried footsteps sounded before Nasette flung the door open with a pot of boiled water in his right hand. Vigo poured the powdered medicine into the hot water and let it dissolve before waking Tita up.

“...Ngh,” Tita moaned.

“Sorry for waking you.” With Nasette’s assistance, Tita was slowly lifted into an upright position where she vacantly stared at Vigo. “Can you drink this?”

The fever put a haze over her. She looked up at Nasette like she didn't understand what Vigo said.

"Tita, this is medicine. Can you take it on your own?"

Understanding when Nasette said it, she held her hand out to Vigo. Nasette placed his hand under hers and helped her bring the medicine to her mouth and wiped the small bit dribbling down the corner of her lip.



...Is there any change?

Change took place immediately after Yuki prayed for Chiruka's well-being. However, by all appearances, there were no changes in Tita's condition.

Is it ineffective without direct contact?

Vigo watched to make sure she drank the medicine to the last drop and helped her lay back on her pus and sweat stained pillow. Tita comfortably closed her eyes when they placed a strained wet towel on her forehead. The eyes of everyone in the room pierced through Vigo. The aggressiveness and tension between them was unsuitable for a sickroom.

"...I can say with certainty she will recover should her condition improve by tomorrow," he informed them, slightly reducing the tension in the room.

Unfortunately, only Nasette's expression softened—the other men sternly squared their faces. Vigo had an inkling about why. "Is it so bad for you that I discovered there are people here?" he asked in as neutral of a tone as he could muster. Bloodthirsty glares cut through him. "Please keep your bloodthirstiness in check in the presence of the sick. I wish to speak with you. Is there a more suitable place to do so?"

"Let's go to the adjoining room," Dante suggested, inviting him to the room Nasette brought the water from. "Keep watch over your sister, Nasette."

"Ah, sure..."

Vigo glanced at Nasette who was taken aback by the volatile atmosphere as he left for the adjoining room with his medical bag. Galian entered the room behind him. A basic kitchen and dining table with four chairs were the room's only furnishings. They urged him to sit and he complied. Dante and Galian sat next to each other across from him.

"First, please allow me to pay my respects for the first time in many years." Vigo placed his hands primly on his lap and reverently bowed his head. He lifted his face to find their harsh scowls hadn't budged. "Don't you...do you not remember me, Lord Galian?"

Galian's eyebrow twitched, but his expression remained stern. The name

Steel-face Galian nostalgically came back to Vigo, and he accidentally laughed aloud. “Your face hasn’t lost its scariness. Well, I guess I shouldn’t have expected much with this beard covering the lower half of my face. I never had much of a presence either. I’m Vigo Kollo. Lidy Kollo’s older brother.”

Instantly, the sharp glint in Galian’s eyes dulled. “You’re *the* Vigo Kollo who crazily buried himself in his research?”

Finding his old master remembered him brought a broad grin to Vigo’s face. “The one and the same Vigo who always played with Lord Cahn, Rifaenotis, and the others.”

“You confuse playing with indulging yourselves in the art of pranking,” Galian corrected, the corners around his wrinkled eyes softening. He turned to Dante and explained how Vigo was a past student of his. Now that they knew he wasn’t an enemy, they filled him in on their situation.

Tita had collapsed with a terrible fever and broke out in hives a day ago. It didn’t take long to determine she had contracted the Ten Day Fever. Losing his head over seeing his sister ill, Nasette copied what his Mage friend had done with the crystal to send out the message Vigo picked up on. They didn’t touch why they were at this settlement or who the people with them were.

In other words, had he not acted on his own to send out a message through the crystal, they would have let her sleep in this unsterile place with no medicine until the illness took her life. She couldn’t have recovered on her own in the state I found her.

Disgusted, Vigo fisted his hands. “...Were you planning on watching her die?”

“We had no such plans. There’s simply nothing to be done about the Ten Day Fever. What do you suggest we could do aside from watch over her until she fought through the fever on her own?” Dante asked, bitterness seeping from every word. He was ashamed of not being able to help his daughter.

“...Pardon my rudeness. You are not mistaken in your claims.”

“No, I should apologize as well. I shouldn’t take it out on you when you are caring for my daughter.” They bowed to each other and peace returned to the room. “Now then, Vigo, this is rude, but why are you in a place like this?”

Vigo met their searching eyes with honesty. “As you can see, I’m traveling around distributing medicine for the Ten Day Fever.”

The men couldn’t hide their surprise upon discovering there was a medicine for the Ten Day Fever.

“The man thought to always be wasting his time on trivial research has been continuing the ambitions of his long-lost nation to this day,” Vigo told them.

Rvydom meant the world to Vigo. He loved his country and was proud to be a citizen of the fallen kingdom. He hoped his statement would convey his feelings to them. Galian and Dante exchanged looks and words with simple gestures.

After a brief pause, Galian was the first to speak up. “Vigo, you don’t appear all too surprised to find me here.”

“Indeed. I heard you had escaped from Cele.”

“From whom? If I may ask.”

“From Rifaenotis. Do you remember him? He is the son of the Lily Witch.”

Galian partially closed his eyes and muttered, “I do.”

“Since Rvydom fell, he started researching medicine in this general area and became an information broker. I heard everything from him. I also know you are the one who lured away the Rvydom soldiers fighting on the frontlines between Adolunde and Maruk.”

Dante looked to Vigo in shock. Galian calmly mumbled, “I see. That eliminates the need for explanation on our part then. Vigo Kollo, allow me to ask you upfront: will you assist me with my plans to rebuild Rvydom?”

Rebuild Rvydom. Those words brought a wave of dizziness with them.

I knew it was coming.

Galian’s escape meant he hadn’t given up on Rvydom. And Rifaenotis was preparing for something. Experience told Vigo the road this all led down.

“...Lord Galian, you might not know this, but I had the least remarkable presence of the people I hung around with. Do you know why?” Galian’s eyebrow arched up. “You see, I have no right to refuse. I didn’t in the past nor

do I in the present. I act as they will me to. And I have no qualms moving as they want me to.”

Dante eyed Vigo searchingly.

“Rifaenotis already informed me he will be assisting you.” The tension surrounding the two men instantly abated. Detecting the change, Vigo smiled too. “As such, I am already an ally to your cause.”

Chapter 24

THROUGHOUT history war ravaged the three countries existing on the continent of Aridol. Despite constant skirmishes across their borders, the three countries remained in equilibrium. Rvydom being absorbed into Maruk was the first ever recorded fall of a nation in Aridol's history.

Vigo mulled over what he could do to help. A country with a long history had met its demise and he was forced to survive in war-torn times. Crushed under the weight of the way the world turned, his love and national pride never faded as he continued the core of his lost nation's research.

"So? What should I do?" he asked.

"We want to make Adolunde our ally," Galian answered unswervingly.

Maruk's tributary territory, Rvydom, would request support from the Kingdom of Adolunde that was currently at war with Maruk, essentially joining Adolunde's side in the war.

"What are the chances of them siding with us?"

"One of Adolunde's princes is going to cooperate with us."

A prince is? When did they manage to get that card up their sleeve?

Little time had passed since Galian's escape. His imprisonment had lasted years.

Galian smiled ruefully, sensing Vigo's disbelief. "You see, the one who rescued me was Rvydom's princess, and her Knight is a prince of Adolunde."

Vigo jumped out of his chair, the momentum sent it flying backward and clattering against the wall behind him. "What did you just say?! The princess saved you?!"

Princess—that word brought to mind the girl Rifaenotis entrusted into his care. However, she didn't possess the ring that stood as proof of a bond

between Knight and Master.

Is there another princess? Is she not the princess? Who are they talking about?

“Is Lord Cahn’s daughter still with you then?”

Shock flicked across Dante and Galian’s faces.

“What do you mean is she ‘*still*’ with us?” Dante questioned, Vigo’s lack of surprise at the mentioning of the princess furrowing his brow.

“What else is there to mean by my question? Rifaenotis has currently entrusted me with the protection of a girl. She looks about fifteen or sixteen in age. We have no solid proof, but it appears she may be Lord Cahn’s daughter.”

“The girl’s fifteen? She’s not a girl of ten? With violet eyes?”

“No. She can’t be much younger than fifteen. Her eyes are black. It should be noted she was in the presence of the Rose Witch before meeting Rifaenotis, which begs to question whether this is her true appearance.”

“...What is the girl’s name?”

“Yuki.”

The doubt on their faces all but vanished at her name.

“...She still lives then...” Galian rasped emotionally.

“Do you gentlemen know of Yuki?” Vigo asked.

“The Yuki we knew was an eighteen-year-old girl with violet eyes who was ten in appearance. We were under the impression she had been executed at the stake by Maruk, but I see...so she lives. The change in her appearance is likely the Rose Witch’s handiwork.”

“If you say so...”

How could an eighteen-year-old look like she’s ten? Then look like she’s fifteen? For a moment, Vigo thought they were the delusions accompanying senility in the older gentlemen, but the serious, self-aware gleam in their eyes kept him from questioning them aloud.

“Where is Lady Yuki now?”

“She is staying at the orphanage a few hours’ ride from here. She said something about going to get someone important to her out of Adolunde. Should I bring her to you?”

“No. She may contract the Ten Day Fever if you bring her here. I see...so she plans to go to Adolunde...”

Vigo still couldn’t see the whole picture. “I believe you have your own agendas, but Rifaenotis requested we allow her to do as she pleases,” he brought up and glanced between the two men. They treated his remark and gaze with silence as they made their own conclusions.

“I have no doubt she is going to rescue Lucat.”

“Vigo, you said you’re traveling around the continent handing out medicine for the Ten Day Fever, correct?” Dante asked, a smile tugging at his lips.

“I am.”

Vigo had no clue how their minds worked or what they were planning, but he resigned himself not to care if it meant helping the country he loved.

“Good, we’ll have you prioritize heading to Adolunde. Use the medicine and your medical knowledge to garner favor with the people. We’ll progress things on our side here. Oh, and teach us how to refine the Ten Day Fever medicine too.”

“Are you planning to use it in negotiations?” Vigo inquired, realizing the underlying meaning in what they wanted him to do.

“Rvydom no longer has a national treasury or funds of its own. The only thing we have of value is the wonder drug for the Ten Day Fever our researchers have worked on for decades.”

Vigo sighed. “Aah, yes, that is true. You are putting the result of my hard work and years of trial and error on sale for your cause. Yes?”

“Don’t be that way. You will be rewarded if Rvydom is rebuilt.”

He didn’t need any reward for what he meant to be a free medicine, but saying so would be tactless.

“With that said, take Lady Yuki to Adolunde. I believe she will bring Prince

Lucat from where he's imprisoned, so help her in any way possible. Put your life on the line if necessary to keep her out of harm's way."

Every single one of these old men are too naïve in how to handle her, is what Vigo thought, but that too sounded tactless, so he kept his opinions to himself.

An erratic voice sounding close to a scream from the adjoining room quickly ended the men's discussion.

THE sun quickly started its descent behind the mountain range acting as the backdrop of the orphanage and outlying areas. A short game after their naps and the children were ready to beat the trail back home. Getting some rest helped Yuki recover enough to walk alongside the children. They spotted Vigo who left in the wee hours of the morning at the fence surrounding the orphanage to keep out prowling wildlife.

"You went out?" he asked from atop his horse. "Do you feel well enough to be outside?"

Pasch stepped in front of her before she could answer she was in tip-top shape. "She passed out from anemia. Examine her please."

Vigo knitted his brow and mumbled something indecipherable under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing. You'll get better with sleep. And sorry to break this to you now, but we're leaving here tonight. Get some sleep once you get your things together. Oh, and don't use a pillow. Keep your head down," Vigo instructed and turned the neck of his horse toward the stables.

"...You're supposed to keep the head lowered with anemia?" Pasch muttered in shock and ran his hand down his apologetic face. "Sorry. Seems like I had it in reverse."

His guilt-ridden expression brought a laugh to Yuki. "Don't apologize. I'm okay. I'm all better thanks to you letting me rest. I can still play the day away with the kids!" She posed with both fists in the air to show how healthy she felt.

Pasch smiled wryly and ruffled her hair. “Stupid. You still look like death. Get some sleep... You leave tonight, right?”

“...Yeah.” Her head drooped.

Living a self-sustaining life where everyone supports each other and smiles—being in such a place almost caused her to forget.

I have things I must do. After the pieces I’ve glimpsed of this world, I’m starting to see what I might be able to do for it.

“I have something I have to do no matter what,” she said with a smile.

Pasch’s smile didn’t fade as he continued messing up her hair. “Having something you have to do sounds about right for a softhearted soul like you. You’re headed to Adolunde after you make your rounds in Rvydom, yeah?”

“Yeah... Are you still against it?”

“Honestly? I am, especially when it comes to Adolunde.”

“Because Adolunde is an enemy nation?”

“You’ve got that right. Adolunde is a mess because of the Ten Day Fever right now, which is why the war hasn’t begun. There’s no telling what will happen once things calm down for them,” he said and suddenly snickered derisively. “I’d prefer things to just stay the way they are.”

Those words echoed in Yuki’s lightheaded brain. Her eyes widened at his unbelievable proclamation. Lips trembling, her question came out in a hoarse voice, “Are you saying you want everyone to die from it?”

“What?” Pasch asked, his eyes locked on hers.

“From what you said, you would be happy if the Ten Day Fever spread, killing everyone in Adolunde.”

“I did not—”

“You did say that. You just said you’d prefer it if we didn’t stop the Ten Day Fever. Soldiers die in war. The Ten Day Fever kills soldiers and commoners without discrimination. Innocent people will die in large numbers at its hand. Don’t you love the people of your country, Pasch? Don’t you want to prevent

their deaths?”

The young man in front of her used those very same round lips to provoke and intimidate her into dying for this country and its people. Now he dared to cower from what he set her aflame for?

“Wasn’t it out of love for the people under you that you wanted to stop the war? It was from that impetus that you...”

That you repeatedly told me to die. Yuki’s face contorted with the pain surging from the burns on her chest. She held her hand over it and took a deep breath to keep the aches at bay.

“Sorry. I wasn’t thinking straight,” Pasch apologized, bowing deeply to her.

“You don’t have to apologize to me for it.”

“I lose my head whenever I’m with you,” he admitted.

She fabricated a forced smile to keep the stabbing pains from showing on her face. “I’m sorry for acting all high and mighty too. But war and the Ten Day Fever are two sides of the same coin.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you set out to stop them, you can. Stopping the war is out of our league, but Vigo, Selena, and I can stop the Ten Day Fever. If it were possible, I’d love to stop the war too though,” Yuki said and shrugged her shoulders. Pasch watched her in surprise. A few moments passed before he started chuckling and ended up laughing so hard he doubled over.

“H-Hey! What’s so funny?! I was being serious too!”

“Sorry. I was just thinking I’m a fool for only realizing it after you put me to task.”

“Realizing what? I’m lost!”

Finishing off his bout of laughter, Pasch rubbed the tears from his eyes and looked at Yuki. “I can’t stop the spread of the Ten Day Fever, but I can strive to put an end to the war. I’m still a prince, you know?” he teased, some of the burden leaving his shoulders. “What good is there in giving up hope just because the war started? Proposing a truce is still possible.”

“Pasch...”

“I’ll head back to the castle today. And then I’ll talk things over with my father.”

“Good luck!”

“You’d better go all out and stop the Ten Day Fever in its tracks too! It’s no laughing matter if I stop the war only for everyone to die of illness.”

“You make it sound like I’m more likely to fail! I’ll do my part well!”

Pasch chuckled, his grin more in line with his age than any she had seen before. “You’d better come to see me.”

His sincere eyes pierced through her, rendering her immobile.

“.....”

During their conversation, the sun had settled behind the mountains leaving an indigo sky in its wake. The early summer breeze prickled their skin with gooseflesh. Was it the cold or what he said that gave her chills?

“...Okay,” she finally managed to get out, despite the awkward twitch at the corner of her eye.

“Can you tell me your full name so I’ll know right away when you come to the castle?” Pasch asked, smiling as innocently as ever. Yuki was captivated by him just enough to fight back the horror of going to Maruk’s castle after what had happened in Cele.

“Um...I’m Yuki Kasuga,” she said softly.

“Yuki Kasuga. Right, I’ll remember it. May Aridol’s blessing be with you.” Pasch stepped forward, grabbed her arm, and pulled her to him. She squeezed her eyes shut as his opposite hand loomed toward her. He pushed her bangs away from her face and lightly touched his soft lips to her cheek.

“...?!” Her eyes sprang open as his warmth parted from her, and she was left with his beautiful smile.

“I’ll go as soon as I greet the headmaster. Rest up before you go. See you again soon,” he said, innocently avoiding the fact he just kissed her and ran off

after patting her head.

It took a good ten minutes before she realized he kissed her.

Chapter 25

YUKI flopped back on her bed to calm her swirling thoughts from mulling too much over the meaning behind Pasch's kiss and eventually fell asleep exhausted from the day's activities. Selena woke her in the late hours of the night and gathered her things as she drowsily dressed herself. By the time her mind snapped awake, she was standing in the orphanage foyer.

"Thank you very much for everything you have done," headmaster said, deeply bowing to them. Chiruka bowed at his side.

"Stop it. I merely did my job. If you really want to thank someone, thank this young lady right here," Vigo insisted, gesturing to Yuki.

"Me? Why?" Yuki asked, thinking her sleepiness was making her hear things.

Chiruka straightened and beamed at her. No trace remained of the pustules or pockmarks. "Thank you so much for tending to the kids for me. I hope you will honor us with your presence anytime you are in the area. You are always welcome here," she said a little awkwardly, unused to speaking and smiling formally.

"You also helped me to learn a lot of new things during my time here, so I would say we're even." Yuki and Chiruka shared a smile.

"All right, shall we get a move on? Thanks for letting us stay," Vigo said and walked out the door to his horse. Selena lifted Yuki's bags and her own and followed after him. Yuki bowed once more to the headmaster and Chiruka, and sprinted to catch up to them.

Things feel like they're suddenly getting busy again. Maybe it's because I've been relaxing these past few days, but I'm worried about what awaits us in the places to come.

Yuki stroked her right middle finger. A long time had passed since a ring last glimmered there—and only for a short while.

“...Wait for me.” She clenched her hand.

THE days following their departure from the orphanage were hectic. Unlike when they visited and stayed a week at the orphanage, they now visited several settlements and villages in one day. They would stay in whatever town or village they happened to be in when night fell and left in the early morning.

Wherever they went, people cordially welcomed them. Sometimes they would be immersed in lighthearted conversation until the morning and have to travel to their next destination with heavy eyelids. Such busy days continued until the season changed to the relentless heights of summer.

“We’ll have made rounds to the majority of Rvydom’s settlements by our next destination. Our destination stands on the other side of the border with Adolunde, but word has it mostly citizens of Rvydom reside there. Once we distribute medicine in the outlying area we’ll make our way to Adolunde,” Vigo said from his horse, fatigue showing on his face. Sunburns from long days traveling by horseback had darkened his skin, and his stubble had grown into a full beard.

“There were surprisingly few people infected,” Selena remarked from her horse.

“I agree.”

Those numbers counted as surprisingly few? Yuki couldn’t believe they could summarize their weeks of distributing medicine with such a remark. At every settlement they visited, more than twenty percent of the residents had already died and another fifty percent were infected. More than seventy percent of an average settlement’s population had contracted the Ten Day Fever.

Seventy percent counts as a few people?

“It’s probably due to the decreased amount of travel between settlements. Maruk has forbidden any domestic and local trade, forcing self-sufficiency on the residents of Rvydom. There are no such restrictions on Adolunde. Things won’t go the same way they have been.... Yuki.”

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

Vigo and Selena looked at Yuki riding alongside them.

“Do your very best to avoid exposure and infection.”

“I-I will.”

Vigo slowly guided his horse by the reins. Yuki quickly readjusted her grip on the reins to follow his lead. They had been traveling for weeks since leaving the orphanage. Carrying two humans and their luggage was too much of a burden on a single horse, especially with needing to travel long distances at a steady pace.

Yuki took every free moment she had to practice how to ride a horse to become less of a burden. She overcame Selena who constantly shook her head saying it was going to be too much for her and learned how to control the horse at a passable level. She could ride well-behaved horses alone now.

“Yuki, there are a lot of slopes and inclines here. Are you managing all right?” Selena asked from behind. Once Yuki learned how to ride, it became the established position for her to take the center with Vigo riding in front and Selena behind her.

She strained her voice to be loud enough for Selena to hear without needing to turn around. “Yeah, I’m fine. Vigo is having his horse go at a slow trot I can handle.”

“Is he? Once we get out of here, we’re going to have to up our pace.”

“Okay.”

“Also...” Selena hesitated. Yuki strained her ears thinking it must be something difficult to say when she heard her tense voice, “Once we get out of this mountain pass, we’ll be at the border between Rvydom and Adolunde. People who have fled Adolunde to escape the center of the pandemic and the bandits and rogue soldiers who have come after them all congregate in that area. Listen to me very closely. If we tell you to—no, even if we don’t tell you to—if you think you are in danger, run away immediately. Think only of yourself.”

Despite knowing better, Yuki turned and looked back at Selena. A troubled smile greeted her. “Hey now, no turning around. It’s dangerous if you don’t keep your eyes forward.”

“Ah, right. Sorry.” Yuki faced forward. A stench from Vigo’s white cloak wafted back to her. The lingering smells of sweat and blood wouldn’t come out despite frequent washing. With few changes of clothes and little time to stop and bathe, none of them smelled great.

“Don’t get me wrong. I don’t doubt your skill with the bow. You are an incredibly skilled archer. You are better than any of us,” Selena said in a kind tone. “But we want to keep you out of danger to our utmost limit... Although that may sound hollow considering we’ve dragged you around the most infected regions of Rvydom.”

Yuki smiled sardonically at the inconsistency there.

“But you are a precious child Rifaenotis entrusted us with.”

“I’m not all that special—” Yuki protested.

“Rifaenotis said you are. As such, we are responsible for—and obliged to—protect you. Do you understand?”

“But...should we come across danger...I can’t leave you guys behind...”

“Save the heroics for when you can actually protect yourself first. You can’t protect other people when you can’t even save your own behind.”

Selena was beyond correct. Yuki had nothing left to counter her with. If she didn’t keep a tight grip on her tongue, she would have spewed all sorts of ifs and buts as an excuse. Irritation at wanting to defend her point and being unable to find a reasonable counter caused her to wriggle in her saddle.

I’m not stupid. I know running away is the safest option for me. I’m fully aware of it. I am, but it still mortifies me.

Her fingers tightened around the leather reins. Being with two people close in age to her parents tripled her awareness of how much of a child she really was and how dependent she was on them.

I realize I have no choice but to rely on others in my current position. She was completely reliant on them from a financial standpoint to her transportation, accommodations, and directions. *Why are they so nice to me though?*

The entire time they had put Yuki’s safety first. A sense of happiness and guilt

came with the knowledge.

But what else can I do but rely on them? I need to at least keep from causing them any trouble.

With her mind set, she bit the inside of her cheek and flattened her lips in a tight line.

Chapter 26

THEY guided their horses through the bumpy, treacherous mountain pass until the trail's narrow confines exited to a steeply sloping terrain. The trees and vegetation tripping their horses on the trail were absent from this new area scorched by flames.

People attempting to escape from Adolunde to Rvydom and vice versa had set up camp before challenging the difficult mountain pass. However, Selena quickly observed their camp had been ransacked only a day prior to their arrival.

"Someone was too flashy with their encampment and lured the roaming bandits in. It's not safe here. Let's hurry through."

"...Vigo, that's not happening," Selena cautioned, her eyes trained on the scenery ahead.

"Why not?" Yuki asked, surveying the same landscape. The charred clearing was devoid of people.

"They're waiting at the bottom of the hill. Their numbers are...hm, I'd say they number twenty plus."

Yuki looked at the bottom of the steep descent but still didn't see what Selena did.

"We can't turn back safely either. Several men have taken to the higher cliffs above the pass to jump us if we return." Horse's hooves clopped behind Yuki until Selena angled her horse alongside her. "Vigo, return with Yuki. You can handle the smaller number on your own. Come back here in a little while."

Enemies were all around them. Yet there was a giddiness to Selena's voice as she locked eyes on the landscape ahead of them.

"...Will you be all right?" Vigo asked, concern lacing his tone.

“You’re horrible for even asking me that. It’s been a long time since I last let loose. You’re pouring cold water all over my excitement.”

Vigo ostentatiously exhaled. Not grasping the direction of their conversation, Yuki studied both their faces. Noticing their flustered younger companion, Selena offered her a smile.

“Yuki, take care of Vigo for me, okay? Also, don’t get hurt along the way. You can come back here once I tidy up.”

“Um, okay, I guess?”

Basically, Yuki and Vigo were supposed to go back and defeat the bandits lying in wait behind them? Anxiety instantly washed over her. Did she have to fight someone again? Did she have to hurt and kill people as she had in Cele? Just thinking about it sent her heart hammering against her ribcage. Unnerved, she wanted to rely on someone for comfort. But the Knight who swore to protect her was no longer there for support.

Looking up at Vigo, she only found indifference as he hastened her back in the direction they came. She looked over her shoulder at Selena who waved as she watched them leave. Pushing through the wave of guilt for leaving her behind, Yuki clenched her right hand and faced forward.

I’m okay. I can’t die until I rescue Luca.

MAYHEM broke out immediately. Screams and angry shouts exploded behind them only moments after they parted ways with Selena. Had Vigo not instructed her to keep her head down, Yuki would’ve been severely injured. Several gorilla like men appeared in their path and along the cliffs. Bloodied weapons shimmered menacingly from their hands.

“Run!” Vigo shouted.

Yuki angled her horse to change direction as one of the men came at her face with a spear. Quickly she ducked down and pinned her body to the saddle, narrowly evading the whoosh of the spear grazing by where her head had been. Arrows whipped down around them as her horse galloped in a frenzy, heavily puffing out its nose and mouth. Together with her horse, they ran blindly back

down a path they hadn't taken to get there.

How far had their wild run taken them? The treeless clearing had given way to the woods where leaves swayed ominously. Pulling on the reins to slow the out-of-control speed, she stroked her horse's mane to calm him. A less trained horse would have bucked her off along the way. She was grateful for the companion she had in this horse who had braved more battles than she had.

Glancing over her shoulder, she confirmed none of the bandits were in pursuit. However, she hadn't gone as far as she'd initially thought—the sounds of battle were close by. The jarring clang of metal scraping metal as sword smashed against sword and frenzied shouts pierced the still forest air. A howling bellow sent a flock of birds flying out of the trees.

They told me to run.

Yuki ran because they told her to. But the frazzled feeling closing in on her wouldn't fade. By all accounts, she took the correct course of action by doing exactly as she was told, but internally she was haunted by feelings of that meaning they hadn't accepted her skills. In the most crucial, dangerous moment, she escaped alone. Even knowing she was a powerless child, she wanted to be of some assistance in this crisis.

I know I'd only get in the way. But...

Yuki studied her surroundings. Squinting through the dazzlingly sunlight, her eyes followed the trunk of a huge tree up to its massive branches perfect for climbing.

"Nothing wrong with helping out if I don't put myself in danger, right?" she muttered, dismounting her horse and tying him somewhere safe.

CLIMBING trees had been Yuki's favorite game as a child. The thrill of possibly falling off and the accomplishment after safely reaching the top coupled with the sweet reward of seeing the world from the height of a tree brought her great joy. Loving to do something has the natural effect of getting you to work at it until you get good. As strange of a hobby as it was, Yuki became a master tree climber.

“It’s been a while since I last climbed,” she said as she pulled out her bow.

The huge tree had plenty of sturdy, thick branches to choose from. How old was the tree for the top to be lost beyond the white clouds? Yuki climbed to a height where no sword or spear would reach her and the leaf cover kept her hidden from archers.

Surveying the area below, she pinpointed Vigo’s location. His dull-white robe fluttered behind him as he nimbly danced around the battlefield with a speed she didn’t think him capable of.

“I can do this!” Yuki pulled an arrow out of the quiver on her back, put it in her bow, and shut her eyes. Few trees were tall enough to block the wind at her height. The breeze whipped her bangs and skirts around.

Wrapping her legs around the tree to mount herself on it in an unladylike way, she straightened and pulled her arm back to where her hand was level with her chin. She took calming breaths to keep her arm steady and opened her eyes to take aim at one of the men encircling Vigo.

Every attempt the man made to land a hit with his brass knuckles, Vigo agilely spun out of the way. Frustration contorted the man’s pocked face, and he roared as he pulled his arm back for a powerful punch to Vigo’s back.

Now! Yuki’s body moved faster than her thoughts. The strength gripping the arrow in her hand relaxed, sending the arrow slicing through the wind. The released arrow struck its mark in the man’s shoulder, sending him flying backward with the speed.

“Next!”

She pulled another arrow loose and aimed for the downed man’s thigh to make sure he wouldn’t rejoin the foray. The second arrow whistled through the air and hit its target, wrenching a bloodcurdling scream from the man.

Startled, Vigo looked in the sky. To be precise, his gaze turned toward where the arrow came from. Spotting Yuki in her hiding place, his expression instantly twisted into a disapproving frown. He easily dodged the man trying to take advantage of his distraction to strike him with an axe from behind.

“I’m sorry,” Yuki apologized, knowing her voice would never reach him. “But I

can't do nothing when I know there's something I can do for you." She snapped up another arrow from the quiver. "Selena isn't here to help. So I'll be the one to protect you, Vigo."

Selena and Vigo had been taking care of Yuki for weeks. She would never feel right by them unless she repaid them in kind.

BY the time the bandits' numbers decreased to only two or three men, Yuki suddenly heard voices at her feet.

"Pursuers?" Nearly startled off her branch, she quickly realigned her feet on the branch to keep them out of sight.

"It's too late to hide. Don't worry. We're not thinking of attacking you. We actually came here to help out."

A man with long, black hair tied back in a ponytail smiled up at her. A handful of men stood behind him. Scars and fresh wounds on the men only added to their war-hardened look.

"Are you after the bandits then?" Yuki asked searchingly, unsure of whether the men could be trusted.

The man shrugged, seeing through her skepticism and not caring. "We came here to pick up a doctor who was on his way to this area. Are we right in thinking you're a member of his party? Tell us what he looks like so we know who not to fight."

They're here for Vigo? Are they the people from Rvydom who live in Adolunde?

"You're right. Um, he's wearing a white robe. Also...he has a thick beard," Yuki shouted down from the tree limb.

"Is that right? I take it they're in the direction you were shooting arrows toward? Dispatch men!" the long-haired man ordered.

The men behind him raised their battle cry and ran toward where Vigo's battle was unfolding. Yuki watched them with her mouth agape as they made it to the battlefield in no time and beat up Vigo's enemies with their bare hands and legs.

“You should come down from that dangerous place too,” the man said in a soft tone with a commanding edge.

Yuki instinctually answered, “Okay.”

With the battle practically over, she put her unused arrow back in the quiver and secured the bow on her shoulder before slowly descending the tree. She freed her upset horse from a nearby tree and rode to where Vigo waited.

Carefully angling her horse around the bodies to find Vigo, a sudden sharp shout had her pulling on the reins.

“I thought I told you to run away?” The fury in his voice caused her to flinch. Fearfully looking over her shoulder, she found Vigo standing dauntingly behind her with the group of men who joined his fight.

“I-I ran away! Like you said to...” her voice trailed off. She averted her eyes from the stabbing glare. “But I couldn’t stop worrying about you... I thought it’d be okay if I climbed a tree.” The words slipped from her in a mumble, the same as any excuse.

A loud laugh from the long-haired man cut into her explanation. “You must be something, little lady! I’ve never heard of anyone worrying for Sir Vigo. Especially against weaklings like those bandits.”

“What?!”

Did he just add Sir to Vigo’s name? Are they acquainted? Yuki looked questioningly to Vigo.

“Are you...Touta?” he asked, surprised by the other man.

“Indeed. Long time no see. Never did I think the doctor we were expecting would be Sir Vigo. I feel like we wasted our time coming to get you to make sure you arrived in one piece.”

“Were you the ones who helped out?”

“Yup,” the young man answered with a boyish smile. “It appears there is still a battle going on at the bottom of the hill. Is Lady Selena possibly handling things there?”

“Ah!”

Selena! We left her in the clearing at the bottom of the hill! Is she okay? Sweat trickled down Yuki's back at the thought.

"Vigo! We have to hurry back to Selena!"

Selena told them to come back when they finished taking out the bandits waiting to ambush them from behind. Yuki readjusted the quiver on her back and kicked her horse into a fast gallop.

"...Is that girl worrying about Lady Selena too?" Touta asked in exasperation, the irony in his voice not reaching Yuki.

Chapter 27

HOW many weeks and months had passed since Yuki met Vigo and Selena? When did she realize Vigo, who she found dreadfully scary at first, could never stand up to Selena's smile? When did she learn Selena tended to say complicated and hard to accept things with a smile? Despite everything she had learned about them in their time traveling and camping out together since she was entrusted into their care, she never found out how strong they were.

Once she discovered this truth, she felt she should have noticed earlier. All the signs of them being more than your average traveler were blatantly visible. They had both been soldiers in Rvydom's military. Rvydom had lost the war—they had survived a lost war in a land now under the control of their enemy.

RACING her horse out of the narrow mountain pass to the downhill clearing where she parted with Selena, Yuki yanked back on the reins and stopped from going farther. How many bandits had attacked Selena? Bodies were strewn down the hill and around the clearing. The bodies still squirmed and wriggled on the bloodstained ground. If that wasn't just a reflex and they were still alive, they had lost pints of blood and were close to death.

Dead center of the clearing and the bodies, Selena danced. Blood drenched her armor and stained her face. An eerily gleeful smile was plastered on her face. She wielded her sword as if it were an extension of her body and cut down another man and then another one directly after him with such accuracy only one hit knocked them out of the battle for good.

What's...going on?

The bloodbath playing out in front of her needed no explanation, but Yuki had a hard time stomaching the gore. Her mind couldn't keep up with the obvious. She froze on the back of her horse, and he neighed warningly. Someone had followed her.

“Yuki, are you unharmed?”

“Eh? Ah, yes. I’m fine,” Yuki answered in shock.

Vigo eyed her carefully before squinting in Selena’s direction.

“I see the Mad Dog is still going strong.”

Mad Dog?

Yuki turned in her saddle to find Touta standing behind them.

“I’m not disrespecting her,” he explained. “When Selena served in Rvydom’s military she went by the name Mad Dog. She was the object of the troop’s admiration.”

“Admiration?”

“Yeah. You see the way she can cut down people like it’s a game? If only we could all be so skilled,” Touta said dreamily as though he wished to kill men like it was a fun game too.

Yuki shuddered in her saddle, her legs shaking in their stirrups. Her eyes darted back to Selena. She was taking on the remaining two men at the same time. The deranged smile on her face chilled Yuki to the core.



Why would people aspire to become someone who can happily cut down others?

During her months traveling with Luca and then Vigo, Yuki was no longer a complete stranger to the battlefield. She witnessed gore, death, and people being hurt for the enjoyment of others more than once. She was no innocent party either as her arrows had pierced their fair share of enemies, but she was too afraid to purposely kill.

“If we don’t kill them, they’ll kill us. You can’t protect anything if you have no intention of fighting back,” Luca told her when she shook in her boots during her first battle.

“But I don’t want to kill anyone! I’d rather die!” she raged at him.

“Then aim for their arms and legs. Lower their morale,” Luca instructed her.

“But—”

“Don’t think something stupid like you don’t want to hurt them. If you don’t do it, they might end up hurting me or the people traveling with us. Would you prefer one of your friends to suffer instead of your attacker? Remember, they have no issue hurting or killing us.”

Since that conversation with Luca, Yuki stopped hesitating to shoot people. Hitting her target had even started to make her happy inside. One enemy down meant the threat to her comrades had been decreased.

But I’ve never thought it was fun to hurt people.

Internally, she always apologized for hurting them. But they had left her no choice but to shoot them to protect herself and the people around her. Glancing around the clearing, she couldn’t find a single person who had qualms with Selena’s look of joy while slaughtering her enemies.

“Vigo! Praise me!” Selena shouted, snapping Yuki out of her absent wanderings. Alone in the bloody, body covered clearing, she shook her hands methodically. Fresh blood splattered from them onto the ground. “I didn’t kill anyone! Praise me! Praise me!”

Vigo sighed with relief and strolled into the clearing with a smile. “You put on

a good fight. But you shed too much blood. Are you trying to ruin your efforts by making them die of blood loss?" He examined the bodies along the path to Selena and handed her a clean cloth. "Look, you got your armor all dirty again."

"Ahaha. Old habits die hard," Selena trilled.

That's a habit? Only Yuki couldn't follow the abnormal situation.

"We'll treat the bandits with severe wounds to keep them from dying. Help me out," Vigo addressed the men with Touta. "Selena, go wash that blood off before you get sick."

The men behind Yuki happily complied and ran over to attend to the bloodied bodies. After she absently watched them go, her slow mind finally registered she should help out. She ran over to the nearest injured person.

"A-Are you okay?"

"Yuki! Don't do anything! Keep from touching them!" Vigo yelled. Yuki flinched, her hand hovering in place over the injured man. Depression hit her in a terrible wave over doing something wrong. He quickly amended his tone, "Ah, sorry. I can't make you help out with something like this. Go help Selena clean up."

How could she stay hurt when he seemed to regret the tone he took with her?

"Okay. Is it all right to go to the river we passed earlier on the trail? It's not too far away. Selena, let's go."

Selena laughed maniacally, her adrenaline still pumping under all the blood coating her. Yuki pinched the only spot on her sleeve that had less blood on it and tugged. Selena wiped most of the blood from her face and right hand and took Yuki's hand in hers.

"The blood will get on my horse if we ride, so let's walk there," Selena exclaimed.

YUKI kept her back turned to Selena while she bathed in the bubbling river. The initial reason for not looking was to respect Selena's privacy, but the real

reason Yuki didn't want to admit was how scared she was to look at her. Merely closing her eyes and the spine-chilling carnage replayed. The number of deaths she witnessed since coming to this world increased a hundred times from the few funerals for relatives who had passed away while she was in Japan.

I can never get used to people killing people. Especially when they are people I'm traveling with. But death is normal in Aridol. If you don't kill your enemy, they will kill you and your friends.

Yuki kept her eyes closed and tried to convince herself there was a meaning behind all the death. The rustling trees, bubbling river, and sound of Selena splashing water over her body had taken the place of the screams she had heard earlier. Who would think a terrible tragedy had taken place in the serenity here?

Maybe I'm the weird one? The horror of their battle isn't counted as a tragedy or disturbance here. They consider the stillness of the forest and the ferocity of the battlefield one and the same. That's why...that's why they can all be so calm while bathed in blood and taking lives.

The bile she kept down with sheer willpower threatened to come back up.

A cheerful voice cut through the images of severed arteries. "Hey, Yuki, did I scare you?"

"Huh?!" Yuki croaked, jumping at the sudden question.

Selena laughed aloud. "Looks like I shocked you pretty bad. I heard from Vigo that you were worried about me. Silly girl. I told you to only think of yourself."

"How could I?!" She wanted to protest against Selena's laughter, but couldn't find the right words to get her point across. But as the frustrated feelings weighed down on her, the anguish and shame boiled inside her gut.

"It's been ages since someone last worried about me. It's kind of nice to know someone cares."

"R-Really?"

"Really. I'm sorry for scaring you. You must have come from a country with little war, huh?" Selena's calm voice blended with the sound of flowing water.

“I-I did. We went to war with other countries in the past before I was born, but I think it was fairly peaceful while I was there.”

Crimes still occurred in Japan, but the Swords and Firearms Control Law prevented any major incidents from coming to her attention in her lifetime.

“I never really liked cutting people much. Regardless of those feelings, I had to train and get stronger, so I forced myself to view it as something fun until my mind became twisted enough to believe it. Before I knew it, everyone started calling me Mad Dog! Once I take my sword in hand, I stop thinking about anything else. Disgusting, aren’t I?” she laughed self-derisively.

“You know, my commander used to love bloody fighting styles. The bloodier, the better. And they grinded that method into me too... There’s no need for me to kill anymore, but once you’re dyed with blood you can never get it off. It sticks with you... Ahaha, what am I even saying to you?!” Selena added forceful cheer to her tone. Yuki’s heart dropped. “Silly girl. You shouldn’t come near me.”

Why did Yuki think their tragic world was the norm for them? Guilt ridden and ashamed of her earlier thoughts, the blood went to her head.

I really am a spoiled child. The foolishness of believing everyone was okay with being covered in blood was the epitome of her naïve thinking. *There’s no way they are fine. Selena is in so much pain for what she has done and even admitted she doesn’t enjoy hurting people. Why didn’t I notice something so obvious? I just assumed they were okay with it because they can do it. I’m so sorry.*

Further shame assaulted her for not being able to apologize aloud and tears threatened to spill from her eyes.

“If only war didn’t exist,” she muttered to herself, blaming war for her naïveté.

How much happiness would have been in this world if war hadn’t brought them despair?

What Yuki failed to realize at the time was that despair was the predecessor to war, which only bred more despair.

Chapter 28

THE settlements they visited thus far had more elderly, women, and children than men. But the encampment Touta's group showed them to only had gruff men. Surprisingly, everyone knew Vigo and Selena. When Yuki asked how they knew each other, most answered they had either served under or beside Selena and Vigo during the war.

Upon arrival, they made their rounds around the encampment examining patients with the Ten Day Fever. Unlike the other settlements and villages, the patients here had light symptoms and Vigo's prognosis was they would recover soon. Once the medical business was attended to, they were led to a large cabin and served food.

"I can't believe Fast-footed Touta was the one who came to get us," Vigo teased.

"Fast-footed Touta?" Yuki repeated.

"It means he was always the first to run from battle," Selena explained, taking a swig of her mug.

"Just how many years do you think have passed since I was a greenhorn on the field? I am now in a position where I am in command of the troops. You won't find me running away. Please don't give the men any more ammunition to tease me with later. I won't hear the end of it." Touta grimaced.

The lot of them appeared to enjoy reveling in memories of serving in Rvydom's army together. Yuki watched them have fun with an absent smile as regret constantly nagged at her.

"But I seriously didn't think the rumored doctor and his entourage was Vigo and Selena. Where are you heading next? Are you going inland?"

"No, we finished the inner regions before coming here. We journey to Adolunde from here."

Adolunde—the mere mention of the country sent tension through the room. All the laughter died in cold, hard stares.

“You are going to Adolunde?” Touta demurred, scowling worse than Yuki had ever seen someone scowl before—and Luca was her Knight.

“We made a promise to take this little lady all the way to Adolunde,” Vigo clarified. The eyes of everyone present focused in on Yuki, flustering her.

“...Who is she?” Touta asked Vigo, layering Yuki with a skeptical look.

“Rifaenotis’ princess,” Vigo sighed.

Touta ran a hand over his scowling face to hide the disgust.

“Oh dear. Do you still hate Rifaenotis, Touta?” Selena prodded, biting into a chicken leg.

“To think he’s still alive. I respect him, but I can’t handle the man,” Touta spat, emphasizing his inability to handle Rifaenotis. “Let’s forget this talk about him. Are you aware of what is taking place in Rvydom?”

“Yes, I’m aware,” Vigo said over Touta, effectively stopping him from saying more. “I ran into them a few weeks back. I take it you lot will be going there too?”

Touta’s eyes widened before a happy smile erased his earlier frown. “We are. Since you know about it, that means you agree with the cause, yeah?”

“You could say that.”

“I am overjoyed to have the opportunity to fight alongside you both again.”

What are they talking about?

Despite listening while she ate, the subject of their conversation never became apparent.

“My trip to Adolunde coincides with their wishes,” Vigo divulged with a shrug, getting Touta even more excited.

“I am glad I never gave up on our dream of rebuilding Rvydom as the kingdom it once was,” Touta exclaimed.

“What?” Yuki coughed into her soup.

They plan on rebuilding Rvydom?

Yuki's voice came out louder than she thought, because she effectively interrupted their conversation.

"What's wrong, Yuki?" Selena asked, patting her back.

"Why would you...rebuild Rvydom?"

Although Yuki's time in Aridol was short compared to the people of this world, she knew the world was mired in chaos. Why would they set about rebuilding a country when it wasn't safe to?

"By rebuild, you plan to take it back from Maruk, right?"

"Of course. There's no other way to rebuild without getting back what's rightfully ours," Touta snapped, slamming his hand on the table. Selena swiftly caught a cup before it tipped over the edge.

"Which means you're going to start a war with Maruk again? How do you plan to do that when Rvydom's population is less than half of what it was when you lost the war the first time around?" she retorted, stabbing at a sensitive topic. Touta and several other men sitting at the bar clenched their drinks, but held their tongue out of respect for Vigo.

Doubts whirled around Yuki's mind, rendering her incapable of seeing her questions weren't welcomed here.

Rvydom lost the war and is now Maruk's tributary state.

"Are you going to start an independence war?"

"We are," Touta answered with frustration and a bit of hesitance. For all he disliked Rifaenotis, he was smart enough to know not to be crass with someone dear to him.

"...Why?"

More of their people and Maruk's people will die if they start another war.

The gory battle she witnessed earlier in the day was only one of many happening across Aridol. Yuki had met too many people during her travels who gave up hope of living after losing their loved ones to war.

“Why? Why do you want to rebuild Rvydom? Is the price of human life worth it to you?”

“Yuki,” Vigo called her name with a warning edge.

“Don’t look at me like I’m the crazy one here. You’re going to start another war!”

“Yuki,” Selena cautioned.

“You’re going to create even more people who are stuck with nothing but their anguish! People are only going to die as a result, with nothing to say for it! It’s far better not to start more wars! Yet you’re going to start another one? Why? For what purpose?” Yuki fumed and balled her fists on her lap.

“Yuki!” Selena hissed.

“Japan—the country I’m from was a part of a major war long before I was born. We invaded countries and killed many people and had many of our own people killed as retribution. Nothing came from any of it! Rvydom lost the war and is a part of Maruk now. What’s so wrong with that? Becoming a part of Maruk might lead to its own form of growth and advancement. Your war will only bring sadness with it! There’s no point—”

A hard slap to her cheek by Selena stopped her rant.

What was that?

Heat rushed to her numb, stinging cheek. Blood from cutting it on her teeth filled her mouth with a metallic flavor.

“I suggest you refrain from saying more. You’ll regret it, Yuki,” Selena said sadly as she somberly fixed her eyes on Yuki’s cheek.

“...Why?”

“Your country may have a lot of experience with invasions.” Yuki nodded. “But Aridol has always been made up of three distinct nations. *Always*. History books have records of wars and invasion plans, but the border creating three countries held strong for centuries.”

Yuki held a hand to her cheek and quietly listened to Selena’s mournful voice. “We were born and raised in Rvydom. We take pride in being citizens of

Rvydom.” She paused and bit the bottom of her lip. A trail of blood trickled down as she continued, “Rvydom stopped existing as its own country ten years ago. We don’t know what caused the war. Did they want our advanced technology and research? Were they trying to eradicate the Witches who made their home in Rvydom? We still don’t know. They just suddenly invaded.”

The sound of utensils scraping plates and drinks being refilled all stopped. Silence filled the room as the people present grappled with memories of the war.

“Rvydom’s king was absent at the time of the war. The king’s absence meant he couldn’t be killed. How could Rvydom surrender without a king or royalty to take his place? No one had the power to make the decision. The people did their best to fight back. But a five-year war was too much for us. Rvydom is the smallest of the three countries.”

Luca had once told Yuki that Rvydom’s king was missing. She never gave much thought to what his absence meant for Rvydom.

“With no one to surrender, somehow Rvydom became Maruk’s territory... The kingdom of Rvydom disappeared from Aridol.” Selena looked up from her cup and straight into Yuki’s eyes. “Yuki, do you know what happens to the citizens of a country that loses?”

“I—”

Selena continued over her, “Maruk treated the citizens of Rvydom as less than dogs. They forced the women into prostitution, the men into slavery, and experimented on the rest. Horrible human experiments.”

The intensity of those words caused Yuki to blanch.

“Yuki, is it really all right for things to stay the way they are? Maruk stole our country, our livelihood, and our dignity from us, and then they spat on it and crushed it underfoot. Is there still a future or hope for us? Will growth and advancement come to us as we serve as slaves?”

“That’s...horrific,” Yuki managed to get out through the lump in her throat.

“But that’s reality.”

Yuki was speechless. She never thought the defeated country received such horrible treatment. It was unconceivable to her. Even after World War II, with the loss and hatred of a losing nation, Japan was still treated as a country worthy of respect; they were not experimented on, tortured, or executed in public. People eventually picked up the pieces, but then again they were allowed to pick up the pieces. What about Rvydom?

But that's reality.

Selena stroked Yuki's red cheek and pulled her into her arms. "I understand you don't know any of this, Yuki. I kept quiet because I didn't want to be the one to tell you. There are things better off not known. But all of it is the bitter truth."

"...I'm sorry," Yuki mumbled into Selena's shirt.

I wasn't thinking about Rvydom's citizens. It didn't occur to me that they want to fight to regain their country and their peaceful days. What terrible things did I just say to them?

Yuki's cheeks reddened and she wished she could disappear somewhere. She clung to Selena to hide her face and find solace from what she said.

"All we have left is our desire to return Rvydom to its former glory. We were born to Rvydom—we can't conceive belonging to any nation but Rvydom," Touta muttered, his tone quivering as he endured the pain his admittance brought. "You know, Rvydom had a princess. Lord Cahn's daughter."

"...It did?" asked Yuki, her voice muffled by Selena's shirt.

"She must have been in hiding waiting for the right time to return to us. She rose to action for Rvydom and for those of us left behind. But she died for our cause—at Maruk's hand!" Touta spat, his fists trembling with rage. He bit his lip to keep his anger in check.

"She would have never died had she chosen to live in secret and not to fight for us! But she chose to die for Rvydom!" he cried out. He took a deep breath and let the tension out. A languid smile replaced his frown. "Our princess died to rebuild our country. What's wrong with wanting to take up her mantle and rebuild it?"

His smile easily squeezed her heart and squelched any argument she could come up with.

Chapter 29

SELENA gazed at the sky with a light cape wrapped around her shoulders to make up for the thinness of her nightgown. Stars twinkled across the night sky. There were so many stars she felt as if she might be able to catch one if she reached out her hand. The sky gave the illusion there was nothing she couldn't obtain.

She should have been in bed by this hour. Vigo said they would leave the encampment early the next morning. She knew she should get to sleep soon, but her mind's wanderings wouldn't let her.

A black glow came from her finger—Vigo was looking for her. Knights and Masters could use their rings to find each other. Surprised, she turned around, and Vigo appeared with heavy footsteps.

"...Should you be up this late?" she asked him.

"What can I say? I'm a habitual night owl."

The days when they stayed up until dawn with Lidy came rushing back to Selena. Back then, they still didn't know the horrors of war and spent every day having fun. Memories of those radiant days were her treasures.

She smiled, knowing he was awake looking for her. "How's Yuki?"

"She was asleep last I checked on her."

Yuki—the small, innocent girl who knew nothing of the world and who Selena had slapped. If only she could remain in her innocence without knowing, but Selena had to go and taint her with vile darkness. Shock rounded her big eyes as they misted and then, as she tried to work through the cruel reality they forced on her, she clung to Selena. Over and over again she apologized through her tears.

"...I wronged her. She'd be better off not knowing."

“She had to learn it sooner or later.”

“Still! ...I could have worded it better.”

Regret clung to her since the afternoon, rendering her sleepless. But she forced a cheerful expression to keep Vigo from catching on to her misery.

“Anyway, is it okay not to tell Touta anything?”

“Hm? Yeah. We don’t have any proof.”

Touta was under the assumption Rvydom’s princess had died.

Selena didn’t know much about Yuki. She didn’t pry either because Vigo asked her not to. Asking questions led to questions. Too much information brings hesitation. Selena was her Master’s sword and shield—and dog. All was well as long as her Master lived. Other Knights may have differing opinions on the bond, but this was how she viewed hers.

Vigo stated Yuki was Rvydom’s princess. But because the girl was unaware of her own status, he wanted Selena to feign ignorance to keep her from ever guessing. Selena was one thing—she could lie. But she doubted Vigo could get away with it when his face immediately gave away his lies. He was never very good at poker because of his easy to catch tells. However, he didn’t seem to be having any issue keeping this secret—Yuki had yet to press them on it. No questions meant no need to lie to her.

“To be perfectly honest, I’m half in doubt. I’d believe it right away if she had violet eyes.”

“Really? I believed it as soon as you told me. I mean, they are eerily similar. Her smile looks just like his, and the way she takes everything in and broods about it is what he used to do too.” Selena closed her eyes as she recalled her former king. She smiled bitterly when the blurry figure in her mind no longer took the shape of a person.

A beautiful starry sky filled her vision when she looked up.

Looks like I won’t be getting any sleep tonight after all.

The sorrow twisting Yuki’s sweet face made the memory of the person she was struggling to remember all the more vivid.

“They really are alike.”

YUKI slowed her breathing and the door behind her quietly closed. Several seconds later, the footsteps grew quieter. Once the sound was completely gone, Yuki exhaled. She pulled the thin blanket over her head and curled into a ball on her bed.

My thoughts are a mess. I don't want to think about anything anymore...

Regret and self-hatred filled her and overflowed as tears until her eyes swelled and her tears ran out. The tears stopped, but her heart and mind weren't relieved of their burden. She hated war and didn't want it to take place. But it had, and the Ten Day Fever plagued the continent.

Everyone is suffering so much.

According to Touta's information, skirmishes were still taking place on the frontlines despite the temporary cease-fire.

How can they wage war?

The wars taking place had hurt more people than they could ever put a number to. Tita and her family were but a small sampling of the victims created by war.

Tita had resided in Maruk during the cease-fire. For all the cease-fire did, the battle still raged under the surface because Rvydom never surrendered. Living in the ravages of war for years would scar anyone, especially a girl as young as Tita. The severity of Tita's situation never dawned on Yuki until now.

The people rummaging in the trash in Cele might have been victims of the war too. Once she started thinking about it she couldn't stop. People could have lived a happy and peaceful life if not for war. But without war, Rvydom will lose its identity as a country.

Rvydom paid a high price for losing the war. Now the people were rising in revolt to take back what was theirs.

I know that's all they can do. I understand it, but I still can't agree with them.

"I can't stop the spread of the Ten Day Fever, but I can strive to put an end to

the war.”

Pasch’s words before they parted at the orphanage came back to her. Rvydom’s independence meant fighting his country.

We can’t do that.

She was against attacking Maruk but also didn’t want Rvydom’s people to continue suffering under their hand. All Rvydom had left now was their roiling hatred for Maruk and their love and respect for their deceased king and princess.

What’s the best way to go about this? Yuki wrapped her arms around her legs and squeezed. She wished hiding under the blanket in a fetal position could hide her from her worries. *I don’t know what the best thing to do is.*

How great it would be if she could shut her eyes, forget everything, and sleep.

Hey, won’t you tell me? Tears stung her dry eyes again. The person she wanted to ask was no longer around. His face and voice were mere memories now. Could he have the answers to the questions tormenting her?

What should I do?

After all this time, she finally found something she could do in helping the sick and made lots of friends along the way. The more she learned about Aridol, the more it stirred her heart like a storm threatening to blow her sense of being away. She clenched her right hand and hugged the middle finger to her heart.

Chapter 30

SLEEP eluded Yuki, and despite exhaustion's pull on her eyelids, she remained stuck awake in bed fighting off her worries with a drowsy mind. Refusing to think about the things haunting her left her mind and heart in a worse state than before she went to bed. But no matter how sad and anguished the mind is, the body goes through its natural processes.

...I need the bathroom.

She squirmed out of her blankets and tottered through the dark room toward where she thought the door was, the floorboards squeaking under her weight. Quietly, she fumbled for the doorknob and stepped into the cool, dark hallway.

YUKI instinctually looked over her shoulder upon hearing the foyer door open on her way back from the bathroom.

"Yuki...?"

"Selena?"

Selena slipped in through the door in her nightgown. Her light-purple hair stood like a lilac in a dark night.

"What's wrong?" Yuki asked, straining her eyes to see the other woman's face.

"Mm, I was observing the stars. They're gorgeous tonight." Selena's white teeth glimmered in the dark when she offered a gentle smile. "Having trouble sleeping too, Yuki?"

Yuki nodded, she then realized she probably couldn't see her and said, "Yeah."

"I see," Selena muttered and walked over to Yuki to wrap her cape around her shoulders. "Want to go see the stars? Some fresh air might do you some good."

Yuki clasped the cape at her chest and silently nodded.

A kind, soothing warmth came from holding Selena's hand as she led the way weaving through the trees in the forest behind the cabin. Aside from the chirping crickets and wind, silence marked their stroll.

"I'm sorry."

Not understanding where the sudden apology came from, Yuki glanced up at Selena. She kept her eyes forward as she continued, "I gave you too many complicated things to think about at once. I'm the reason you can't sleep, right?"

"That's not true!" Yuki shook her head in vehement refusal and stopped walking. The small jerk on her hand stopped Selena too. "I'm just using this as a chance to think through all sorts of things."

"But I'm the source of those worries. You didn't need to know about the ugliness of our land."

"That's where you're wrong. It's good for me to know. I'm glad you opened my eyes to the intense suffering the Rvydom people are going through."

However, that's exactly why I can't agree with what they are trying to do. Yuki kept her thoughts to herself and shook her head. *The Rvydom people aren't the only ones at fault. I can't agree with what Maruk and Adolunde are doing either. Why did they all take the path resulting in hurting others?* Lamenting the choices of three countries wouldn't resolve the problem, but she couldn't stop feeling frustrated by it.

Selena patiently looked down at Yuki. Yuki felt like she had to say more, but the words caught in her throat and wouldn't come out.

"...It's just...I see how powerless I am. I'm worthless when it comes down to it."

In the end, that was the central issue. Regardless of how she felt or thought, the world moved on. She didn't have the means to stop it either.

"If possible, I don't want the war to take place. I understand you see it as the

only choice, but if my say mattered, I don't want Rvydom's people to fight. But I'm not stupid. I know nothing will come of me thinking this way," Yuki confessed, the words flowing out of her like raindrops. Gradually, the confused pieces started to come together.

"I wonder what it is I'm supposed to do," she said mostly to herself.

Traveling through Rvydom for weeks brought with it various experiences and encounters. All of which further jumbled the situation.

"War is an entanglement of various people's motives and intentions," Selena spoke up after Yuki finished her piece. "Countries want money as compensation from the defeated country, nobles use war as a means to kill enemy nobles, and there are even people who make their fortunes from selling weapons and services during wartimes. If a few people could stop a war, we would have stopped it. But normal people and soldiers can only dance to the tune of those in charge."

Yuki was aghast at the mere thought of people starting wars for those reasons. Selena only added to the blow, "That's what war is. All we can do is struggle, resist, and eventually fight."

She smiled sadly and squeezed Yuki to her. "You know, Yuki, I was extremely happy you were thinking about Rvydom. Thank you for getting angry and opposing the brutality of war in my place."

"S-Selena?"

"But don't you have something you must do, Yuki?"

"Something I must do?" Yuki parroted.

She mulled over what it could be. Mixing ingredients to increase their supply of diminishing medicine? She promised Vigo her assistance making medicine on the morrow. Apologize to Touta? She already planned to do so first thing in the morning. What must she do? What did she need to do?

Selena offered a hint before Yuki came to an answer, "Yuki, what are you traveling to Adolunde for?"

"...Ah."

Luca.

“Dangers will arise along the way. Don’t let yourself get stuck in a rut thinking about things you can’t do anything about. I’m grateful you worry about us, but stop. Think only of yourself and your Knight.”

Selena’s kindness was too much for Yuki’s frayed emotions and summoned the tears to gush from her sleepy eyes.

Luca. What would the Knight whose name she cried out in her heart say if he saw her now? *Luca! Luca!*

“Awww, why must you be sooo cute?” Selena merrily exclaimed over Yuki.

I’ll do my best not to cause you any more strife and to keep from having you ever call me a brat again.

Was Luca doing well? How long ago was it that she last knew of his whereabouts and health? Was he still rotting in a cold jail cell somewhere?

I’m coming for you. So please don’t forget me. Please be well. Please be safe. Please... Please...

Chapter 31

THE following morning Yuki's fears were confirmed when she looked in the mirror and saw her red, swollen eyes. A dry laugh escaped her. Still, she found herself waking up feeling refreshed.

Nothing has changed between today and yesterday, but I feel better. I'll save worrying about things I can't help for after I secure Luca.

Some people may say she was escaping reality by focusing on finding Luca, but worrying about things she could do nothing about was unhealthy. Panic often accompanied her thoughts about Luca. She needed to rescue him soon. The faster she could meet him and apologize, the better. Faster, sooner, quicker—those words raced through her, bringing with them frustrated impatience.

Luca was smart and skilled—he should be fine. A prince wouldn't be treated poorly by his own country. Such thoughts did little to comfort Yuki though she tried. The mounting panic swelled inside her until she refused to look at it or touch it these past few weeks.

With Adolunde only a stone's throw away, the itch to see him as soon as possible came back with a vengeance. She kept her feelings at bay by convincing herself he wouldn't go down without a fight, but the effectiveness was reaching its limit. Seeing him in person and confirming his well-being was what she wanted most.

"I can't cry anymore."

I hate war, fighting, and everything related. But kicking up a fuss about how much I hate something and doing nothing about it is no different from the kid I look like.

"That's why I am going to start doing what I can," Yuki told the sixteen-year-old reflection of herself. The serious expression was ruined by her swollen eyes. She laughed at her appearance.

YUKI tidied up her bed and headed to the foyer with her packed bag. A ready Vigo and Selena stood at the door with Touta and a few other men there to see them off.

“I-I’m sorry,” Yuki quickly apologized, tugging the quiver strap over her shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it,” Selena answered her with a grin that faded as soon as she saw her eyes. “Whoa! Yuki, your eyes look terrible!”

“Ahaha. They swelled,” she dismissed and placed her bag on the floor to bow to Touta and the other men. “Please forgive me for the horrible things I said yesterday.”

Their eyes were locked on her when she lifted her head. She bashfully twirled her finger in her hair.

“I wasn’t aware of the cruel and inhumane treatment Rvydom’s people have been put through... I guess that comes off as a poor excuse, huh? I still don’t want it to come to war, but that’s nothing more than my childish hopes. I know there’s nothing I can do about it.” Yuki looked around the foyer at everyone present.

“However, I do not want to see the people I know suffering and getting hurt. So...” she paused and clenched her left fist to her chest. “Please be careful. Please don’t get hurt...”

She bowed deeply this time, her long hair cascading over her head. When she straightened, Selena stood in front of her with her arms wide open and pulled her face into her voluptuous chest.

THEY finished their farewell exchange and stepped outside. A listless Vigo stroked his chin and turned to Yuki. “Er, about where we’re going from here...”

“Where are we going to circle around from? The south? Or are we taking the west side route to keep from the frontline battles taking place to the south?” Yuki interjected. She eagerly swung her bag onto her back and unfurled her

map.

Vigo smiled wryly. “No, we’re headed straight for the capital.”

“Pardon?”

Yuki had prepared herself for the long-haul of visiting various regions at a semi-decent pace to the capital. Vigo’s words took her completely by surprise.

“...Why?”

“I know you’ve been itching to get to the capital. Sorry for dragging it out by taking you around Rvydom with us.”

“But...”

Weren’t they going to travel around treating people with the Ten Day Fever in Adolunde like they had in Rvydom? Suspicion was roused in Yuki by the unusual change in course. Were they going to bypass all the sick people on the way to the capital for her?

I mean, sure I want to get to the capital as soon as physically possible, but... Yuki stared at Vigo and Selena. Selena tilted her head at Yuki’s questioning gaze. Don’t they want to cure everybody of the Ten Day Fever? Is it okay for them to skip people to take me to the capital? I should just go to the capital alone. I can head on to the capital and they can go on their rounds.

With that decided, Yuki looked to Vigo who doused her hopes with an exasperated face. “Don’t even think of something as stupid as going to the capital alone. You’ve been warned of Adolunde’s dangers. Their capital is no exception.”

His correct guess almost made her drop her bag. Selena was shocked to see her react that strongly. “Oh my gosh, Yuki, were you actually thinking of going alone?”

“Eh? No. I mean...I shouldn’t trouble you guys any longer...” she fumbled over her excuse and tugged at a loose string on her dress. Vigo karate-chopped her head twice.

“Just as you have circumstances taking you to Adolunde, we have our own,” he said, surprisingly kind for him.

“You have your own reasons for going?” she asked, letting go of the string to look up at him.

“Yeah, we do. It’s not like we’re going to the capital out of the goodness of our hearts to help you.”

“...Really?”

“What good would come from lying about this?” Vigo quipped, exasperated by her doubt. She wasn’t sure whether to feel grateful or apologetic.

She settled with, “Thank you.”

“The capital is relatively close to our current location. Let’s make haste. Selena, pull Yuki onto your horse if she starts to fall behind.”

“Gotcha.”

They started securing their luggage to their horses’ saddlebags. With only one large jute bag and her quiver for luggage, Yuki didn’t need to go through the same lengths as they did to secure her stuff.

They really are spoiling me, she thought as she handed stuff from the ground to them. Perhaps their close age to her parents was why she felt like these almost complete strangers allowed her to depend on them like parents. Happiness came from them looking out for her. They always put her first, treated her kindly, and let her have her way.

They’re like Papa and Mama.

How long had it been since she was last in the tender embrace of those two kind people who always cared for her?

Are they well? Pain stung the depths of her heart. Would she ever see her true parents again?

Chapter 32

THE flowers were just starting to bloom the last time Yuki found herself in Fol. The beginning of spring had welcomed her into this world. At the time, she knew nothing about much of anything. She kept chasing down Ain and badgering him with questions about what this or that was and how things worked. The impression she had, swaying in the back of the carriage with her sole possession—her archery case—tightly clasped to her lap, was that poverty and tension permeated the city beyond the carriage window.

A whirlwind of challenges arose from there. She was forced into the attire of a Witch and marched into Fol Castle alongside Luca. And there she helped capture the slimeball Isis. That same night Luca admonished her and praised her a little bit. The following days were like a dream as Fol quickly regained a semblance of its former glory. When she left with Luca, relieved soldiers and city dwellers bid them farewell.

“...What happened here?” Yuki whispered, horror lacing her tone.

Ten days had passed since they left the border at Rvydom and arrived at the entrance to Fol. The stronghold called Fol Castle looked drastically different from her first visit. The direction they approached the town from made it look like the castle sat in the center of it. They had their horses trot around the desolate areas of the town until they came to the large town plaza of row houses where they stopped their horses to rest.

“Have you been here before, Yuki?” Selena asked, walking over to where Yuki stretched at the bone dry water fountain.

“...Yeah, once before. But...”

What happened here? What changed? Yuki wanted to ask someone, but not even a ghost dared wander the roads and abandoned buildings waiting to be repaired. The dead silent city roads were devoid of people and were eerily familiar to a graveyard.

“Fol’s a lot of things, but quiet and empty wasn’t one of them. Even under that maniac’s control...” Yuki murmured, surveying the desolate late afternoon plaza.

What happened?

She restlessly darted her eyes around for an open door somewhere or a straggler wandering the streets.

“Fol is relatively close to the frontlines. The people might be hiding in their houses out of fear of us,” Vigo observed.

They led their horses on foot behind them as they knocked on darkened house and shop doors. But not even a peep came from the other side of the stubbornly locked doors. They jiggled the doorknobs, which creaked in protest but didn’t budge—a sign people still lived inside. Bitterness started to form at their refusal to open the door.

“Well, time to test if any inns will let us in,” Vigo concluded and tossed his right leg over his horse to ride to the nearest inn.

THEY visited several inns across Fol, but their expectations were met in the worst way—no doors opened to them. They also stopped at several private homes offering housing, with little luck. If inns weren’t opening their doors to strangers, private homes wouldn’t dare to either. By the time they searched most of Fol and the outlying area, the late afternoon sun had set, bringing darkness. With little other options, they decided they had no choice but to camp outdoors for the night and rush to the capital.

As they were about to gallop out of the city to camp in the covering of the nearby woods, footsteps caught Yuki’s ear.

“Yuki, is something wrong?” Selena asked when Yuki fell behind.

“Yeah...I think I just heard the sound of someone’s shoes.”

Is someone around?

The footsteps may have been the horses’ hooves on the cobblestone streets. But once the doubt was lodged in her mind, she didn’t want to ignore it.

“I’m going to check out the sound!”

“Ah! Hang on, Yuki!”

Yuki turned her reins toward the outskirts of the city where the sound came from and kicked her horse into a gallop. A world of difference existed in the speed a person could run versus a horse—the identity of the sound quickly became apparent.

It’s a person!

Around the street corner a woman in her forties was running with a large wooden bucket in her hands.

“Wait!” Yuki shouted. The woman jumped and liquid spilled from the bucket as she ran as fast as she could. “Hey! I asked you to wait!”

Why did the woman run? Why was everyone holed up inside their pitch-black houses? Flustered by the sheer number of questions she wanted to ask, Yuki couldn’t find the words to stop her with. At any rate, she needed to get her to stop running away before she lost sight of her. A horse raced past Yuki at wind-breaking speed while she hesitated to come up with a way to get the woman to talk with her.

The wind left in the horse’s trail whipped up Yuki’s hair. Selena dashingly leapt from her running horse in front of the woman.

“Eek!” shouted the woman as she crouched to the ground.

“Selena!”

Selena glanced up at Yuki’s shout.

“I haven’t done anything wrong...” the woman said in a quivering voice.

Yuki dismounted her horse once she caught up to them. The woman kept muttering apologies and sat with her head pressed against the dirt. Yuki crouched and put her hand on the woman’s shoulder.

She’s trembling.

Her shoulder shook uncontrollably against Yuki’s hand, conveying the woman’s fear. She tried to address her as gently as possible, “We have no

intention of harming you. Please lift your head.”

The woman hesitantly lifted her head from the ground. Even in the evening darkness, her stark-white skin stood out.

“You’ll be in trouble if someone sees us, right? Vigo!” Selena called out.

Vigo raised his hand like he understood the signal and headed to the crossroad.

“U-Um...” the woman fumbled and sighed when she discovered a sixteen-year-old girl—Yuki—was who she dealt with.

“We have a lot of questions we would like to ask you. Would it be all right if we talked to you?” Yuki gently asked, and smiled reassuringly.

The woman’s eyes darted around the street and she sputtered, “N-N...ah, um...er...there is a child with the Ten Day Fever at my house... I cannot allow anyone inside.”

The Ten Day Fever had permeated Fol as well. Was that the cause of the graveyard-like silence?

Yuki offered the woman her brightest smile. “In that case, shall we make a deal? In return for curing the child’s Ten Day Fever, let us ask our questions. We are the assistants to a traveling doctor.”

The woman gasped and stared at Yuki. Then she glanced over Yuki at Selena and Vigo standing behind her. She gave a small nod of her head.

Chapter 33

THE skittish woman led them to one of the outlying inns they had pounded on the doors of earlier. Luckily, the old inn still had a usable stable attached. The woman quietly told them to put their horses inside the empty stable before looking in all directions and slipping inside her home. They followed her once they settled their horses.

“...Pardon me, but are you not allowed to go outside?” Yuki questioned the woman as soon as she set foot inside her home. No one needed to observe much to tell the woman was sneaking around.

The woman froze like a deer in the headlights. Vigo cut into their conversation bringing Yuki back on point as well, “Save the question and answer session for later. Show me to the patient. Yuki, please assist with the medicine preparations. Miss, please show me to the patient’s room.”

“Ah, okay...”

“I’ll be borrowing your kitchen,” Yuki said to the woman’s back, picking up the water bucket she had left on the table near the door.

Preparing and combining the medicine had become one of Yuki’s primary jobs during their travels. She used an iron pot to boil the water and divvied it up among several cups. In one cup, she poured Rifaenotis’ powdered medicine concoction and stirred it with a wooden spoon.

She took the cup with the mucilaginous, brownish-green liquid smelling of mugwort and iron and the cup with boiling water in one hand each, and followed Selena to a makeshift sickroom. Crammed into the large room once used as a parlor were ten occupied beds.

“...So many sick...” Yuki muttered.

Vigo didn’t look at Yuki as he systematically examined every patient and methodically gave orders. She hopped to action following his command to give

medicine in order from the youngest to the oldest patients. Five of the infected patients consisted of the woman's husband and four young children. The other five moaning in beds were neighbors who had contracted the Ten Day Fever and left their homes to keep their families from infection.

They finished the basic medical rounds and moved to another room in the inn when Vigo broached the subject, "Now then, won't you explain the situation for us?"

The woman, who introduced herself as Corona, nodded and finally told them what they wanted to know. After Prince Lucat liberated Fol from Isis' control, Fol's citizens who had successfully escaped before his take over—including Corona and her family—returned from where they had taken refuge.

Upon their return, Corona and her family rebuilt their abandoned home and opened their spare rooms to the public as an inn. A month afterwards a sudden surge in the Ten Day Fever spread the illness to people from all over the land. The Fol Castle Knights began claiming the inauspiciousness of the late-night hours were suspected of worsening the spread of the Ten Day Fever, and suggested people shouldn't go outside at night.

This initial suggestion rapidly escalated to them proclaiming those who go out at night are the source of the Ten Day Fever and would be appropriately punished for their crimes. Pressure from the Knights and fear of the rumors had the townspeople limit their trips and work outside to the morning and afternoon. Once evening fell, they firmly locked their doors and held their breath hoping no ghosts or sick would come knocking.

Yuki shook angrily on the couch as she listened to Corona's explanation. "What the heck?! Where do they get off telling people they can't walk around at night?!"

"Yuki, in Aridol nighttime is considered the Witch's Hour and is abhorred," Selena explained, patting Yuki on the head to placate her.

"The Witch's Hour? Just because of a superstition it's okay to restrict people to their houses even though there's no proof they'll get infected by walking at night?"

"Nor is there proof they won't get infected," Vigo interjected. Yuki swallowed

her words. “I don’t believe it either. But it means there are people who do believe it here.”

But that’s a fear the Fol Knights are instilling in the people. Is it all right for them to be spreading this rumor?

Yuki still didn’t understand what role Knights played at large in Aridol, but if they were similar to an elite class of police, their acknowledgement of the Witch’s Hour being inauspicious meant Adolunde held to such a belief.

Even if Adolunde isn’t preaching that belief, that’s how most people see it here. Yuki wanted to speak her thoughts, but her dry throat wouldn’t move to form the words.

Adolunde declared nighttime as the Witch’s Hour. Refuting their beliefs was a dead-end. Even if someone took the time to listen to her deny their beliefs, they’d only look down their nose at her and snort. What did a foreigner know?

Exhausted mentally and physically from being the only healthy person caring for her family and five other sick people, Corona slumped back in her chair after finishing her long-winded story. Not wanting to put any more strain on her, Vigo ceased with his questions and told her to rest. Corona protested resting when she was the only healthy family member to assist the doctors, but Vigo told her his instructions to rest were his explicit orders as the doctor she wanted to assist.

“We’ll borrow the adjacent room. We won’t leave and cause you any problems. Relax.”

Tears filled Corona’s eyes. She bowed her head and muttered her gratitude ceaselessly.

TWO days later and Yuki had rarely left their single room in Corona’s inn. The inn was the best in the area with a bathroom furnished in every room, removing the need to leave for anything but food. Yuki offered to help cook, but after a good night’s rest Corona was back in action and wouldn’t hear anything of it.

“Absolutely not. I cannot impose any further on the kind doctor and his assistants. You must rest!” Corona declared and shooed her out of the kitchen.

From then on, she brought all meals to their rooms further eliminating any need to leave.

The nighttime restrictions placed on the town forced Corona to busily move about all through the day to finish her business outside before nightfall. On the most part, it was just Yuki's group and the sick patients. The only time any of them left their room was to check on the patients. Aside from leaving the room twice a day to give the patients their medicine, Yuki was bound to a moderately sized room anguishing away the sudden free time on her hands.

I shouldn't be wasting my time sitting around right now.

Were it possible, she wanted to examine and help everyone locked away in their homes. She brought it up with Vigo, but he shook his head.

"Their country is probably doing something for them," he dismissed the idea.

She rocked back and forth with her knees hugged to her chest on the bed. Until now, her days were marked by hurried travel or action. She was always racing against time. Now time passed by slower than a snail. Her race had been halted to slug speed despite the need to rush not having been addressed. While the constant travel had its own tiring aspects, for some reason she felt far worse and languid sitting in the inn doing nothing than at her most hectic moments.

I don't want to be stuck with my thoughts.

"Yuki, what are you traveling to Adolunde for?" Selena's words from the night at Touta's encampment came rushing back, haunting her. "*Think only of yourself and your Knight.*"

Stop it. Yuki clawed at the invisible seal on her chest. *I don't want to think about it.*

Thinking would unleash the anxiety and worry tightly stuffed in the box buried in her heart.

Don't make me imagine it anymore.

She shook her head in denial. Until now, every second was too hectic, difficult, and stimulating to think about anything other than immediate survival.

Every day brought encounters with new people, prayers for those walking the line between life and death, and earnest entreaties to console people from taking their own lives from despair. Her words of comfort meant for the patients were actually for her all along.

“You will be okay. You will absolutely be okay,” she told the dying patients.

It's okay. Luca will absolutely be okay.

“If you lose yourself to despair, you'll only worry the person you're thinking of,” she consoled the family members of patients.

If I lose myself to despair, I'll worry everyone around me.

“They will definitely get better!”

I will definitely see him again.

What did Luca say the last day she saw him? Even his words escaped her. They were terribly hurtful, scarring words too. Once said, they deeply stabbed her, and yet now she found they eluded her. She remembered being infuriated with herself for being useless. Efforts to be accepted and acknowledged ended in futility. Ashamed, she ran away. Each time she remembered her childish escape, she wanted to disappear.

Luca...

Why was it every time she decided not to cry anymore the unstable lid on her feelings flipped over and let her anxiety loose?

“Don't worry. I will definitely come for you,” she repeated over and over to the rhythm of her rocking.

Chapter 34

TIME passed as Yuki lost herself in her thoughts and the light spilling in from the window had taken on an orange hue dyeing the room a violent red. Vigo and Selena were away. Listening closely, she heard quiet footsteps from the adjacent room. Wanting to see the changing sky, she rolled off the bed and walked over to the window. The orange colored roads were empty of the pedestrians seen sporadically during the afternoon.

I wonder whether we can leave this place tomorrow.

Yuki looked out across the row house rooftops. Even toward the outskirts of the main plaza, houses jutted out in every direction filled by many families and people. Those people were now helplessly suffering from the Ten Day Fever. A desire to cure them all overwhelmed her, but the logical side of her knew the futility of her desire.

I didn't know how difficult it would be to help so many people. Her mind flitted back to the young man she promised to see again. *I think I understand how he felt now.*

Pasch said he wanted to play with the children at the orphanage instead of thinking about the crisis he was faced with.

I want to stop thinking too. She folded her arms on the windowsill and looked down. Her eyes widened on the people she saw below.

"Knights," she murmured.

Two armored Knights walked the streets deep in conversation.

Were they on patrol? Corona had been frightened to death of being found when they came across her because she had been walking around during the Witch's Hour. Yuki's suspicion was aroused by the way they looked. Instinctively, her time traveling with Luca and his men left the feeling they weren't on patrol.

Why? ...What are they doing?

Trying to get closer, she bumped her nose against the window. She placed her hand on it and strained her eyes to get a better look at the soldiers—the nudging suspicion came to a head then.

“Why are they laughing?”

The Knights were chatting about something and laughing. Anger bubbled inside Yuki.

All the townspeople are suffering and in pain. Fury over how they could laugh turned her hand white from the pressure she pressed it against the glass. Why aren't they doing anything to help? They take advantage of the people by locking them away at night and dare to laugh?

Here Yuki was lamenting her inability to do anything to help. And there the Knights who had the power and authority to do more laughed and strolled the streets at the times they restricted. Unlike the fallen Rvydom, the people of Fol should've had the support of their country. Their lives should have been better.

How can the soldiers who are supposed to be helping—laugh? Fury reaching its boiling point, even their smiles brought her ire. Their smiles are nothing like the children.

The numerous children she encountered in Rvydom tried their best to be cheerful despite the pain and suffering. In spite of their young age, they knew if they showed their misery on their faces their hopes would be dashed.

The glass clattered—from Yuki's enraged shaking. Noticing it didn't help her regain her cool.

They laughed. Not just any laugh—one like they were having all the fun in the world. They laugh and smile in a town where everyone is suffering and dying.

Yuki's feet moved of their own accord, tiptoeing without her thinking to do it. Silently opening the door, she held her breath and shut it behind her. Slowly maneuvering through the hallway where she could hear Selena's voice from the adjacent room, she made her way to the stairway at the end and descended the steps one foot at a time. Once at the foyer, she soundlessly slipped outside. Making a sound would let on to the roiling anger coursing through her veins.

YUKI darted off the moment the door shut behind her. She had one goal in mind: to find the Knights who strolled around laughing. She dashed out to the road and looked in the direction she saw them disappear. The sky had lost its light and with it came a darkness blotting out the distance. Going by what she had seen of the roads from the window, she ran and quickly found them.

The two Knights walked at a leisurely pace. They didn't check their surroundings, but looked at each other's faces while they blabbed on. Seeing them drugged back the exhausting sorrow Yuki felt earlier in the day. The anger didn't persist and she found herself feeling like a lost child.

Sad. The Knights made her sad. The country made her sad. They seemed to have given up on helping Fol. Just like the sun setting beyond the horizon, Yuki's heart dropped to the pit of her stomach. With every passing second the last vestiges of dark-blue transformed into the pitch-black of night.

It's fine I came after them, but... Trudging through the nighttime streets doused her wild rage to a simmer. *What do I do now?*

It was a bit late to worry about her actions, but she felt like smacking herself for running outside without informing anyone. Corona had been so frightened being outside after curfew that she quivered the whole way home. There had to be ample reason for such a deep fear to take root. Recklessly foraying outside would incur Selena and Vigo's wrath when they found out too.

What excuse should she come up with? As she contemplated her options, the Knights came to a sudden stop.

Crap!

Frantically scanning for a hiding place, she slipped in to a narrow opening between two buildings. Peeking her face out ever so slightly, she watched the Knights. They nervously glanced around the area and hastily twisted the doorknob to a nearby building. A dazzlingly light spilled from the opened door and the men squinted against it as they set foot inside.

"...Is this a lodging house? Maybe?" Yuki muttered, staying in her hiding place thinking they might turn around and come back out. The darkened sky erased

her shadow and light trickled outside through closed curtains.

Things could have ended there if she had been content to think it was a lodging house. However, Yuki couldn't let go of the way they nervously looked about before going inside.

Are they doing something they shouldn't be? Her initial thought was Knights wouldn't stoop that low, but the sneer on their faces shattered their trustworthiness.

"...I'll just steal a peek inside through the window. I'll go home as soon as I check it out."

And then I'll let Vigo harshly scold me.

Yuki slipped out of the gap between the buildings. Raucous voices grew louder the closer she came to the place the men had entered. The voices were oddly merry. It reminded her of the sounds and noises she often heard in the school cafeteria. She walked at a crouch to the side of the building and popped her head up under the window so her eyes were level with the lowest pane of glass. Nothing obstructed her view inside the building she instantly knew was a bar.

Is this a joke?

The bad feeling she had was on the money. Knights filled every corner of the bar. Many of them had stripped off their upper body armor and caused a ruckus with a bottle in one hand.

I can't believe it. Yuki trembled. The boiling pit of feelings that finally started to simmer down had the heat turned back up. *I don't believe it. I don't believe it. I can't believe it!*

She accepted the spectacle in front of her as reality. But she couldn't comprehend how it came to be.

Adolunde and Maruk are at war. Fol is the closest city to the border. The city was already taken over once. There's nothing to guarantee it won't happen again.

Corona told them the large numbers of Knights were there to stop another

takeover.

And here they are drinking away the night.

The majority of the town's population suffered from the Ten Day Fever. Only a handful of the infected had the strength left to reach out and accept a helpful hand offered to them.

Yuki stood up on an impulse. A man with long, copper hair tied loosely behind his head looked straight out the window at her. Their eyes met through the window.

"I can't believe it," she said louder this time.

Yuki marched over to the front door and put her hand on it. Logically, she knew she should skedaddle back to the inn before things took a wrong turn. She shoved the door open with her full strength and rudely stomped inside.

"I can't believe it!" she shouted.

Silence started from the copper-haired young man and spread across the bar as all eyes turned on Yuki. One of the men opened his mouth to say something to her, but she glared at him and lashed out before he could get a word in edgewise.

"How can you be drinking your brains out at a time like this?!" she couldn't stop herself from shouting.

Chapter 35

ACCORDING to Corona, Adolunde Knights and soldiers had taken up residence in Fol Castle during the war. With the onslaught of Ten Day Fever victims, the recently liberated Fol had neither the supplies nor power to withstand an attack from Maruk. From what she saw of Fol before, Yuki agreed that was the smart thing to do.

But this is too much.

Since when did the men in the bar start drinking? More than a few had bright-red faces and others were hiccupping and slurring their words. Yuki glared at them all equally and shook with rage.

“I can’t believe this,” she spat for the nth time. The raucous laughter and jubilant chatter inside died to the same silence hanging over the empty streets.

“How can you drink at a time like this?” she hissed. The words echoed off the walls of the silent room. “You drink when the people of Fol are suffering and grieving...”

At her pointed glare some averted their eyes, hung their head, scratched their cheek, or silently guzzled their drink. The reactions varied from person to person.

“Why aren’t you trying to help them? Don’t you have a Ten Day Fever initiative or way to support the sick?! Why—” Yuki couldn’t continue after getting that far. Putting both hands over her mouth like she was sick, she shook her head vehemently. She didn’t want to look at the Knights’ faces. Leaving her talking to her anger would lead to her saying something horrible to them.

A glass suddenly shattered against the ground. Yuki jumped at the loud sound. Fragments littered the ground around her feet. Someone chucked a glass at her.

“Don’t’cha speak ‘ike ya know what’cha blabberin’ ‘bout!” a man slurred and

glared at Yuki with red cheeks and glazed over eyes. Glass shards—from the bottle he threw—spun across the ground as he kicked them toward her with his unsteady gait. “Got sick of stayin’ locked up quiverin’ in ya pretty ‘ittle ‘ouse and came ‘ere to lay ya ‘igh and mighty opinion on us, did ya?! Huh?!”

My high and mighty opinion?

“You’re wrong! That’s not what I’m here for!” Yuki sharply raised her voice.

“Tell me, what am me wrong ‘bout?!” the man shouted pounding his fist against the table he leaned on for support.

That’s not what I came here for... Yuki couldn’t find the words to counter with. What’s wrong with this place?

Unusual silence stilled the room, enough to make anyone forget they were in a bar.

Something feels strange.

The mood coming from the Knights perplexed her. If they lashed out at her, she could have said her piece.

“Ya don’t know smack ‘bout anythin’! Nothin’! Not one bit of it!” the man bellowed in a voice closer to a shriek from a dying man than a Knight.

“That’s far enough,” said a sickeningly sweet and well-defined voice.

“...!” The drunk grudgingly shut his mouth.

The young man with copper hair touching the center of his back calmly stared at Yuki. “You too, miss. Don’t say any more.”

“...Are you the person in charge here?”

The young man who looked somewhere in his mid-twenties lightly shrugged. “Person in charge? Now that’s a new one. The highest ranked officer is tucked away in his warm bed in the castle, embarking on a journey through dreamland about now,” the man ridiculed with superficial friendliness. Disgust for him instantly broiled inside Yuki.

“Don’t joke with me,” she fumed.

“It’s no joke. The one in charge of this place has been sleeping the whole

time. These guys here have been made to look and act like Knights, but they're just a mishmash of grunt soldiers taken from commoners in Fol and the surrounding towns."

A bug started chirping somewhere in the room. The incessant sound of its chirping was a nuisance to the ears.

"Do you understand what this means? Hm? The Ten Day Fever is prevalent in Fol. We also don't know when Maruk will attack again. The only soldiers present are makeshift ones who've barely had any training at all." The young man's sharp eyes pierced Yuki. He wasn't just looking at her—he was tearing her apart with his eyes. "Fol has been discarded. Abandoned. Not just Fol either. Us too."

Yuki was thunderstruck. *But...but Vigo said the country would support Fol so we don't have to.*

"The national treasury has dried up after the long, drawn-out war. The rapid spread of the Ten Day Fever is reducing our numbers at a harrowing rate. But soldiers are a necessity. Moreover, Fol is the stronghold Prince Lucat only just recovered. There's no guarantee they won't take over it again during our instability. It's not like Adolunde is just going to quietly give it back either.

"So in a show of military strength, they're dressing up the militia and treating them like Knights. But there aren't any reinforcements or support coming for us either," the man explained, gesturing to the men dressed as Knights.

"You won't be getting reinforcements?" Yuki asked, her feet planted in the entryway with glass glittering around her.

"Didn't you hear me? Fol has been abandoned."

Aridol was in the midst of war and everyone desperately struggled to survive amid the sorrow and pain. People fought thinking their lives would become slightly better if they bettered their country through war.

They're fighting for their country and were still abandoned? Why?

Beyond a doubt, Yuki thought the Knights were subjugating Fol. By all appearances, the Knights were receiving relief and taking advantage of Maruk not attacking—all to live the easy life while everyone else suffered. They enjoyed their drinking and laughter while the townspeople were locked away in

their homes.

Now I get it... The weird sense she got from the soldiers in the bar suddenly made sense. *Everyone here is suffering too.*

“Tell me, can you imagine it? Humble farmers and merchants are being propped up and treated as soldiers. Not just any soldiers but the highest class—Knights. They are abruptly forced to bear arms when they haven’t touched a sword or a spear a day in their life and without any training are told to kill people.

“To top it off, they’re not even sure when the enemy they’re supposed to kill is gonna show up. Heck, the place they were stationed is crawling with disease. Even if they never have to fight a battle, they’ll likely catch the illness and die anyway. These men who left their families and loved ones behind are living every day in fear of a future they can’t foresee.”

The young man’s silky hair glimmered under the bar light. He was talking about something grim, but had a mocking sneer on his face the entire time—strongly indicating the truth behind his words.

“Thinking your death might come today or tomorrow or the next day would start to make anyone go mad. Are you going to mock them for drowning their fears in alcohol? They don’t get to do it every day either. Just a few get the chance every week. They aren’t shirking their patrol and guard duty. Do you still shame them for their weakness?”

Yuki hung her head and loosely shook it.

I can’t say that now.

The smiles she saw on the two Knights earlier had been smiles of relief over their temporary reprieve from their fears of the dreaded future to come. Yuki couldn’t feel the same roaring anger she had earlier.

“...I say they’re on patrol, but it’s not accomplishing anything. Even if we threaten and forbid people who walk around during the Witch’s Hour, the number of infected doesn’t decrease. Everything we’re doing is all for naught,” he said cynically. Yuki shook her head again.

I ruined their one place of escape and rest.

The possibility of dying tomorrow—Yuki was no stranger to it as she had a traumatizing taste of that fear in the tower. On more than one occasion she considered escaping from reality. And here she was now ranting and berating the people in this bar for doing the exact same thing.

I'm the worst.

A wave of nausea caused by self-loathing threatened to bring bile to her throat. Impulsively, she became annoyed and self-righteously ranted and raved at them.

“...I'm sorry.”

“I don't mind. People who don't know better would misunderstand by looking, I'm sure. It's also a fact we're drinking when the townspeople are suffering.”

Yuki still shook her head, ashamed to the point she wanted to disappear. She despised herself for getting so worked up earlier.

“I ruined the mood here...” she croaked.

“Don't let it get to you,” he said in a chipper tone. The nonchalant cheeriness to his voice didn't fit the solemn bar. “Aah, but if you *reaaally* want to make it up to us...” Yuki slowly lifted her head and saw the mischievous look in his eyes and grin. “If a future beauty like you would accompany us for a bit, pouring our drinks, these squalid mongrels will get distracted and forget all about what happened,” he laughed. The man who chucked the glass at her laughed too.

“We're not so bad a girl like her has to worry after us. I mean, we get to have our fill drinking like this every once in a while. Who can be bad after that?”

Laughter erupted across the room. Some of the men started cheering and jeering, bringing about more laughs.

“Leaving the jokes behind, I'm relieved we have someone like her still around to challenge us for our laziness. It means Fol isn't doomed yet.” The young man placed his glass on the table and stood. “The night is late. I'll escort the future beauty home so she doesn't encounter the Witch's curse.”

“Lord Rhad!” one of the men called him to a halt. “I'll go for you.”

Once the men heard that, they all started offering their names to go in his place.

“What’re you thinking? I can’t let you drunks go. Besides...” Rhad looked Yuki over. “It’s the privilege of a lady-killer to see a beauty home.” Before he finished speaking, he wrapped his arm around her waist and tugged her against him.

“~~~!” Startled, she became tongue-tied.

An irresistibly sweet whisper tickled her ear, “You needn’t come fishing for men in places like this. I’ll come for you in three years, so wait patiently at home for me, sweetheart.”

“Excuse me?!” Yuki shouted.

The bar instantly filled with jubilation and raucous laughter again.

Chapter 36

“**ARE** you going to explain the meaning of this to me? Hmm?”

“...I am so sorry...”

Rhad escorted Yuki to Corona’s inn where she attempted to soundlessly slip inside. Her attempt was thwarted by the daunting statue of Vigo she bumped her nose against. Face sternly locked in a scowl, he waited for Yuki’s answer. Evidently, he wasn’t going to let her through the foyer until she said something.

Having failed to devise a plan to effectively explain herself, Yuki came clean about everything she did. She rattled on about how she spotted Knights laughing and charged after them into a bar like a raging maniac. Fueled by her anger, she lashed out until she discovered they weren’t Knights but a militia that kept the morale of its troops up by infrequent visits to the local bar. And then she divulged how Fol had no relief measures in place for the Ten Day Fever.

Vigo listened to her from beginning to end with a furrowed brow and sighed heavily when she finished. “I understand what it is you want to say. Regardless, I’m very angry with you.” Glared down by his ashen gaze, Yuki stood at attention with her hands behind her back.

“I-I’m r-really sorry!” she stammered out.

“I realize you did what you did out of compassion for the people of Fol. But you know, you should at least have some idea of what the consequences are when you disappear without telling us.”

Hearing how they panicked and searched after they discovered she was missing left Yuki feeling ashamed.

“You should have at least said something to us. Letting your feelings and thoughts build up until you act rashly on them does no good for anyone. Make sure to speak up when you have something to say. I’m drained from Selena

taking her frustration out on me,” Vigo lectured. His scolding lasted for about an hour.

“Haah. If you didn’t come back over something like this and died out on the road somewhere, I’d be heading to the gallows with a noose around my neck,” Vigo eventually grumbled.

“Why’s that?” Yuki asked, not understanding the meaning of the words he let slip. He responded by messing her hair up.

“Aah, well, you know? Rifaenotis will hang me for it,” Vigo said finally and spun around and marched up the stairs.

THINKING about her foolish choices left Yuki with nothing but regrets as she opened the door to her room. Despite knowing she was running from reality, she wanted to sneak into the room without seeing anyone and fall asleep. Selena greeted Yuki on the other side of the door with open arms.

“Welcome back, Yuki! Were you yelled at by Vigo?!” she asked as she captured Yuki in her arms and squeezed.

“S-Selena?!”

“You’re pretty adorable when you’re depressed, Yuki,” effused Selena.

“I guess...”

“Oh dear. You really are down in the dumps, aren’t you? Did someone say something mean to you?”

Yuki gave her head a small shake. “They didn’t. I’m just such a big idiot.”

I did something stupid again. I ruined the militia’s morale. How can I apologize to them? Her thoughts circled around those three things.

“...Yuki, you’re as pale as a ghost,” Selena consoled gently, sympathizing with her. But Yuki knew she shouldn’t let herself be placated by her kindness. “Did you fail at something?”

Yuki couldn’t see Selena’s face with her head down, but she heard the sympathetic tone. Taking her silence as a confirmation, Selena added, “You’re

still young. You're going to make more mistakes than you can count or remember. There's nothing wrong with making mistakes. Regretting them is pivotal to growing and avoiding the same mistake in the future."

Selena rubbed her back as she held her silence. "Tell me, Yuki, what do you think is most important when it comes to making a mistake?"

"...The most...important thing?" she repeated.

Apologizing? Or having the other party forgive you? Various things seemed as if they could fit, but none matched what she thought was the correct answer. She slowly lifted her face from Selena's chest.

Selena grinned and softly said, "You finally looked at me. The most important thing, dear, is what you do afterwards. You can't turn back time to redo your mistake, which leaves you with considering the best course of action you can take after it's happened."

Selena stroked Yuki's hair.

"Failure and mistakes plant the seeds of success in us. They're a lesson to never make the same blunder twice." Until that point Selena spoke with a serious tone and expression, but then she suddenly grinned broadly. "Aww! I still can't get over how precious you are! The way you stumble with a pale face is cute too! Your guilt ridden expression is tantalizing! And I have a headache from all the painfully true stuff I just spewed!"

"Whaaat?!"

Selena squeezed Yuki once and picked her up. With nothing under her feet, she wrapped her arms around Selena's neck.

"It's time for you to sleep today, Yuki! I bet your thoughts are going to keep you up, so I'll have Vigo make you a killer sleeping pill. Prepare yourself for a bitter experience!" Selena rambled on, not wanting to give Yuki the time to mull things over. "Are you listening to me? Get a nice long rest tonight. Sleep a ton and then sleep some more until your body and mind are refreshed. Then you can think about things. Nothing good comes from people thinking about stuff when their mind is too stressed to be rational."

Giving Yuki no room to refuse, she set her down on the bed. "I mean it. No

good comes of acting on something when your mind is overloaded and emotionally distraught,” she admonished wagging her finger in front of Yuki’s nose.

“...Are you speaking from experience?”

“Oh dear. Did such rebellious words come from this little mouth here? I’m begging you, don’t learn from Rifaenotis’ example and take the atrocious path of pointed retorts!”

“Uh, I only asked because you were the one who said it was painfully true.”

“You’re hallucinating now! Your exhaustion is getting the better of you!” Selena deflected and lifted Yuki off the bed with one hand to pull down the blankets with her other hand. She put her back down and brought the blankets to her neck, tucking her neatly inside.

Patting the bulging blankets, Selena smiled and soothed, “Are you in a position where you can worry about others right now, Yuki? GET. TO. SLEEP. All jokes aside, you really look out of sorts. You’ve been working nonstop after all.” She brushed the hair from Yuki’s face.

“Yeah...”

Anemia or lack of sleep brought a chill to her hands and feet—her body was in desperate need of sleep. Selena strained a smile and used the palm of her hand to shut her eyelids. “All right, shut your eyes.”

Giving in to what she was told, she closed her eyes.

“Good night, Yuki.”

“Good night, Selena.”

Yuki’s consciousness melted into darkness.

Chapter 37

THE lure of sunlight shining through the windows wasn't enough to pull Yuki from the embrace of sleep. Several times she opened her drowsy eyes only to roll over and doze back off. Falling back to sleep four times finally did the job when she woke up fully refreshed the fifth time to the strong midafternoon sunlight.

...This is the first time I've had a sound sleep since coming to Aridol. Or at least one not fraught with nightmares and fevers. She felt like she did on a Saturday morning when she didn't have to set an alarm.

Glancing around, she assumed Selena was attending to patients in the adjacent room because she was gone. Cheerful voices coming from the hall brought a smile to her face.

Sounds like they're feeling better. What a relief.

How many days had they stayed at Corona's inn? Corona's family made a complete recovery. The other patients they attended to had returned to their homes in the neighborhood as well.

I need to hurry to the capital.

With their promise to cure Corona's family fulfilled, it was time to move on. Or so Yuki initially believed, but the frazzled feeling laying over her like a heavy, dark cloud wouldn't let up.

Moving on means forsaking Fol...

Forsaken by Adolunde, Fol now had to brace for the worst with its meager strength weakened by the occupation. They would need to turn a blind eye to Fol's plight to move on to the capital.

"I'm relieved we have someone like her still around to challenge us for our laziness. It means Fol isn't doomed yet," the copper-haired young man said the prior night.

But it's not like I can do anything for them. What could Yuki do for the people suffering all over? ...*All over?*

Cocking her head to put her finger on the sudden strange feeling she got, her concentration was broken by the room door being quietly opened. Careful not to wake Yuki, Selena pushed the door slowly to keep it from creaking.

"Selena," Yuki greeted her from bed.

"Oh, you're awake?" Selena gave up her attempt to slowly open the door and came in with her usual noisiness. She held a tray of food in her right hand. "Looks like someone got her beauty rest. Your complexion is much better today."

She strutted over to Yuki's bed and placed the tray on the side table where she poured water from the pitcher into a cup. "I brought you food thinking you might wake soon. I have better timing than I thought," she laughed.

"You sure do. Thanks, Selena." Yuki swung her legs over the side of the bed and pulled the tray onto her lap.

"Thank you for the food," she said, clapping her hands together before picking up the spoon. Selena sat down on the side of the bed facing Yuki and watched her. "Is everyone doing better now?" she asked while she ate.

"They're back to full health! Seems like Vigo and I aren't needed anymore. Vigo said if we hurry we can make it to the capital today or tomorrow."

"I see..."

"What? You don't look happy. Is the food bad?" Selena asked.

Yuki shook her head and blurted out the nagging feeling she had, "Hey, Selena, why were all the patients brought into a single room?"

"What?"

"This inn has rooms for the children, the parents, and guests, right? Why didn't they keep them in different rooms and instead put them in the adjacent larger room?"

"...Yuki, are you half-asleep? Or did you sleep so much your brain checked out?"

“I’m awake...I think. When I started thinking about it, I realized we always moved patients to one location.”

Selena finally understood what she was talking about and thoughtfully put her finger to her chin. “There are a lot of reasons for it. Take this time as an example. There were ten patients and only one woman who could take care of them. Rather than have to run from room to room attending to them, it’s easier for her to nurse them all in the same room.”

“Hmm, I see.” She brought the spoon to her mouth. Selena’s point was convincing, but thinking on it further made it become less plausible as the core reason. “By your theory, we always borrowed a house during our travels for the same reason to prevent Vigo from overexerting himself by running all over the place. Another reason was to prevent others from getting infected through foolish contact. The sicker the patients are, the greater the danger of spreading it to others, right?”

Ah! The origin of the nagging feeling she had oddly felt in place. It’s because they’re all over the place!

Tension eased, she rapidly scooped all the food into her mouth at once. Finally, she had clarity over what she wanted to do next. Wanting to move forward right away, she rushed her meal.

“Yuki?” Selena eyed her warily.

“I’m going out for a bit after I finish eating,” Yuki said after swallowing a large gulp of soup.

“Where to?”

“Fol Castle,” she said and shoveled more food into her mouth without chewing it much. With her cheeks puffed out with food, she munched away and added more food every time she swallowed some. Flabbergasted, Selena watched her.

“Fol Castle? After what happened yesterday, I’m not so sure about you doing that...”

“Eah, ow ‘hat ‘o ‘ust ‘e tinkin’ ut’ ‘eed ‘alk....” Yuki coughed out around her food, sending pieces everywhere.

“Sorry, would you please speak after you finish chewing?”

Yuki nodded and swallowed her mouthful of food and swigged down some water. “Yeah, I know what you must be thinking, but I need to talk to the people there.”

“Talk about what?”

“The people of Fol have all been nursing their sick family members at home, right? But I think that’s only exposing other family members to the risk of infection.”

“Haah...” Selena sighed, not following Yuki’s prattling.

“At this rate, it’s like sending a zombie survivor to help other survivors only for them to get bitten and turn into one—everyone will become infected with the Ten Day Fever.”

“Zombie? What’s a zombie?”

“Uh, a zombie is a corpse that has come back to life and can kill other people and make more zombies out of them...”

“What?! The dead come back to life? And make more like them?! Your country has such a monster?!”

“Huh? No, this is just an analogy.”

“It is? Then you lied?”

“No, it’s not a lie.”

“It’s not? Do we have to worry about these zombies coming by boat to attack us?!”

“Forget it! ANYWAY! As it stands, Fol will have nothing but people infected with the Ten Day Fever. I want to go to Fol Castle and convince them to open up an area to gather the infected and quarantine them,” Yuki explained and looked Selena in the eyes. “You’re the one who told me to think about what to do after a mistake is made.

“I want to see Luca as soon as I can—I’m worried to death about him—but I’m not capable of turning my back on people who are crying out in need right in

front of me. If we run out of medicine, I remember how to make it. Oh, but herbs might pose a problem. Still, we can find a way to handle it..." she rambled on with different excuses until she ended by saying, "I can't abandon the people of Fol for the capital."

Selena assessed Yuki and let out a small sigh. "You found a way around what we stopped..." she muttered and said, "...So? What do you want from me, Yuki?"

"I need your advice on how to convince Vigo," she whispered, not sure if it was something she should ask of her.

"Oh, that's easy," Selena answered.

"It is?"

"You just have to serve him alcohol during his lunch," she replied with a wink and a vixen's grin.

Chapter 38

YUKI went to Fol Castle and was led to the innermost chamber by a guard; she had terrible memories of this same chamber. The chill and griminess of the place had changed since then. At least it was cleaner and didn't reek of death anymore. She shut her eyes to hold back the memory of the young girls Isis turned into dolls.

"I said I'd come for you, sweetheart. Did you get sick of waiting and come for me instead?"

Before her was the despicable chair Isis had sat his fat rump on. In Isis' place sat the copper-haired young man—Rhad. His long hair trailed down his back in a tight ponytail.

"So you *are* the most important person here," she said giving him a pointed look.

Rhad shrugged his shoulders. "Among the people present, yeah. So, what do you want? Did you actually come to see me because you couldn't get enough of me last night?"

"I did not... I have a proposition for you."

Rhad arched his eyebrow. "Heh? Go ahead then."

Yuki nodded. "Currently, the people of Fol—the people suffering from the Ten Day Fever in Fol—are being cared for individually by their families at home. But I believe that is highly ineffective. The more caretakers you have nursing the sick, the higher the chance you have in infecting more people. The best thing to do is to gather everyone in one place rather than have them spread out."

"I see. And?"

"Err, I was thinking the largest place that could house so many of Fol's patients is Fol Castle and I was hoping we could turn Fol Castle into a kind of makeshift hospital. It'd be great if the people here will help out as well..." Yuki

fidgeted.

Rhad answered her without any apparent change in expression. "...I understand what you want. But why do we have to take part?"

"Why?" she repeated, blinking back at him as he crossed his legs.

"Yes, I want to ask you why. We're Knights. We're not doctors. What logic dictates us taking in highly contagious sick people? Furthermore, you run the risk of infecting this city's only army."

"Why? How can you ask that?! Aren't you people here to protect Fol? If your men catch the Ten Day Fever, we'll look after them here. Once they recover they'll never have to fear the Ten Day Fever again."

"...Is your head screwed on wrong? Did they let a madwoman in here? The chance of recovering from the Ten Day Fever is close to nonexistent," he demurred, tapping his fingers on the plush armrests.

"I'm here with a doctor. His medicine can cure it. The family and sick at the inn where we're staying all made a complete recovery," she snorted in retort.

Rhad propped his elbow on the armrest and rested his cheek against his hand as he worked through the information she laid out.

"Face it; Fol's soldiers have nothing to do outside of routine patrols until Maruk makes its move. They have too much time on their hands making them overthink things and get jumpy. Don't you think it's smarter to have them keep their hands and thoughts occupied with helping the sick and accomplishing something? Besides..." she stopped and looked at the soldiers standing by in the room. She spotted a few familiar faces from the bar.

"...Having some connection to the people of Fol will help motivate your men to want to protect Fol."

Her gusto rapidly lost its initial strength the more she spoke. The confidence she walked into the room with was chiseled away by burrowing stares from all sides.

While what I'm saying may sound absurd, it's not wrong. She gave herself a mental pep talk and squared her gaze at Rhad and Rhad alone. *Plus, I have what*

Vigo and Selena said on my side.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you won’t be getting any assistance from Adolunde. In that case, nurse the sick back to health inside this castle and get food and supplies from their families as payment for the medical fees. My associates and I don’t need money.” She layered Rhad with a provocative look. He tapped his finger against his cheek and shut his eyes.

“Hm, personally your conditions are tantalizing. Doctors who will hand over their medicine supply for free. And the people of Fol who will give us rations in return for our manpower. If any of us fall ill, our compatriots can nurse us back to health... It does sound appealing.”

“Doesn’t it?!”

I did it! Yuki schooled her features to hide her internal desire to leap for joy. She was about to discuss how things would work when Rhad spoke faster than she could.

“But, you know, it’s not like Fol Castle belongs to me. The person above me left me in control. My decision means nothing without their permission.”

The person above him? Is he talking about the person he said is traveling through the land of dreams?

“But aren’t you the most powerful person here?”

“I don’t have the authority to do anything.”

“Authority? What good does that do for someone who isn’t here to know the suffering of the people firsthand? What do you believe your superior officer would do if they were here right now?”

“Mm, I’m fairly sure they’re someone who gets the job done. They’d probably take your offer.”

“Then give the order in their place! If your superior officer suddenly shows up and has an issue with it, I’ll talk to them directly!” Outrage for Rhad who sat elegantly in Isis’ despicable chair overtook Yuki’s emotions. “What the heck is your problem anyway?! You keep saying you aren’t the most important person here while you sit on that throne! I mean, aren’t there only soldiers living here?

This castle is huge and laid out like a freakin' maze! Sectioning off one of the tunnel-like halls shouldn't cause much inconvenience!"

Rhad watched her tremble with anger in astonishment before he laughed aloud. "Ahaha! You've got guts. I can say that much at least. You'll make a fine woman someday."

Yuki raised an eyebrow and tossed her hair over her shoulder. "I don't need you to come for me in three years."

"Too bad. Now then, are you finished taking up space in my audience chamber? We might not look the part, but we're busy."

"What?! How could you still say—"

Rhad spoke over her objection, "We have to make appropriate plans to accommodate Ten Day Fever patients. So, when are you saying this great doctor will come to the castle?"

"Pardon?" Surprised, she lifted her head and saw his devilish smile.

"At the rate things are going, Fol won't change. The end will come for us if we don't change something. I, at the very least, am grateful to you for knocking some sense into the men here, my future bride."

"Like I already said, I won't be your bride!" she objected, but the effect was lost because of her smile over him listening to her plea.

Rhad deliberately lifted one shoulder in a half shrug. "How cold. The least you could do is reward me for finally deciding to take action in Prince Luca's place."

"...What did you just say?" Yuki's jubilation froze in place.

Chapter 39

“**HERE** you go. I would like these blankets washed. Can you take them to the washhouse?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Also, it’s almost time to eat. Once you finish with the wash I request assistance with meal preparation.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Once you’re finished there, please prepare a report on how to make the best use of the remaining supplies in the storehouse.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“If it’s possible, I want you to acquire more vegetables and grains to use in meals. If we don’t have the supply for it, I’ll figure something out. Just let me know.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

For the week since she brought her proposition to Rhad, Yuki ran all over the castle managing things. The promise she made with Vigo for his permission was that she would, “Manage the people of Fol Castle” and “Always be the one to administer the medicine to patients”.

From morning until night she hustled around the castle managing the soldiers and administering medicine until she collapsed on her bed in the late hours of night. The entire week had been a constant blur of rigorous work.

Over one hundred patients afflicted with the Ten Day Fever made their way to Fol Castle, turning things chaotic. The soldiers busied themselves under Yuki’s direct command and Corona’s family volunteered their assistance because they didn’t need to fear infection again.

“Looks like you’ve gotten completely used to your work and new position

here,” Selena remarked from the doorway to one of the rooms Yuki busily passed on her way to administer medicine after dinner.

“Selena! Are you free right now? If you’ve got spare time, help me carry the medicine!” Yuki ordered.

“...You’ve completely gotten used to ordering people around too. You’ve made big sister Selena sad,” she whimpered with pretend tears. Ignoring her, Yuki ran on to her destination.

“Ah, Lady Yuki, it’s almost time to administer the medicine...”

“Yeah! Thanks! Did you bring the medicine? Let’s start from the corner of the room and—SELENA!”

“Coming!” Selena shouted back and ran into the patient room.

Beds were crammed in to fit eight people. A blanket was used to partition the beds from each other. Yuki approached each bed and administered the medicine the soldiers already prepared for her. She said a few words to each patient with a smile.

“Congratulations, the scabs have come off.”

“Do you hurt anywhere? Do you feel pain here?”

“Once Doctor Vigo gives the okay, you will be free to return home. Eat well and rest up, so you can return home healthy all the sooner.”

There were over ten rooms with eight people each she would visit and administer medicine at a steady pace. Once she finished her rounds, laundry and cleanup awaited her.

“Yuki, why don’t you take a break from putting things away for today? You have to be at your limit,” Selena insisted at the end of the day, concern lacing her tone.

“I’m okay! I’ve still got plenty of pep in me to keep going!” Yuki deflected, fist pumping the air before dashing off to handle more chores. Selena sighed, but Yuki had already disappeared around the hallway corner.

“She’s obviously pushing herself too much.”

YUKI wiped the sweat from her brow with her arm. Large piles of dirty clothes and blankets were finally down to the last basket. People in Aridol did their laundry in places called washhouses that were equipped with a small manmade pond that looked like a kiddie pool. The water came up to Yuki's ankles.

They did their laundry by putting their dirty clothes in the pool of water, pouring soap on top, and stomping on the dirty laundry with their bare feet to get the dirt and grime off. Surrounding the open-air washhouse was a semicircle shaped building used for drying clean laundry.

The building's rooftop sloped toward the washhouse pools to let the rainwater run down and refresh the water supply. Using the same dirty water to wash clothes wasn't efficient, and there weren't any springs close to Fol, so they often waited to do laundry until the first sunny day after a great rain.

"Okay, it's all clean now!" Yuki gave a satisfied smile to the sheets and clothes now drying on the racks inside the drying building equipped with a glass ceiling to let in sunlight. "Next, we have to let the dirty water out, clean up, and prepare dinner." She smiled at a nearby soldier.

"Lady Yuki, we won't be able to wash anything tomorrow if you let the water out of the pools... Is that all right with you?"

"Yes. Reusing the water works for one or two days, but it's unclean to keep using it. Especially since we are dealing with clothing worn by the sick. It's better to deal with the nuisance of fetching water from the springs than reuse contaminated water. This way is more hygienic."

"If you say so," responded the soldier with a dry smile. He clearly didn't understand her reasoning.

"Thoroughly wash your hands with soap when you're finished," she instructed.

They have no comprehension of what it means to be sanitary here.

Yuki sat on the pool edge and wiped off her feet before sliding them into her sandals and shoving off to her feet. An icy chill crawled up her spine and pierced her brain in a dizzying wave sending her body lurching forward. She caught the

pool edge and slowly lowered herself onto the ground.

It's happening again.

There was a sharp buzzing in her ears. The voices of nearby soldiers echoed as they went through one ear and out the other. She felt as if her head were being held underwater. She put her head between her knees and squeezed her eyes shut. Even behind closed eyes, the world spun. Knowing it wasn't the world that was spinning but her mind didn't alleviate the pain and dizziness. Numbness started at the tip of her tongue and spread to her extremities.

Come on. Stop already.

She knew the symptoms would abate if she sat and waited it out. The numerous dizzy spells she encountered recently desensitized her to the severity of them. Wincing as black and white spots dotted her vision, she desperately forced her mind to think about what she needed to attend to next.

"Umm, food. Yes, food. Breakfast will be natto, miso soup, and rolled omelets... Putting sugar on eggs is heresy... But Luca loves it. Uh, he's not here though, so um...we're going to run out of wheat soon...I need to stretch it out by cooking it with lots of water like porridge..." she muttered, careful not to bite her numb tongue. The lack of oxygen and blood pumping to her brain led to distracted thoughts.

"Luca only eats hard oats."

Oh no. The number one thing she didn't want to think about somehow cut through the fog.

"BY Prince Luca, you mean—"

"Didn't I tell you? He's the most important person in charge here. He's the one who recaptured Fol from Maruk's occupation. He's Adolunde's fourth prince and—"

"Where is Luca right now?!" Yuki shouted over Rhad. A frosty scowl met her demand.

"Heh? You one of Prince Luca's fangirls?"

“I am not! Luca and I are—”

Rhad cut her off, “Are you going to claim you’re lovers? ...You even dare to call his name without proper honorifics? You don’t know your place,” he spat, contempt icing his voice. “I’ve taken a liking to you, sweetheart, so let me clear things up for you. Getting conceited because Prince Luca bedded you for a night is called forgetting your worthless status in life. There are millions of women like you around him.”

“I told you, that’s not how—”

“Enough. Will you get out of my sight before you further displease me?” When Yuki wouldn’t leave, Rhad got off his chair and sauntered out of the room. Passing by her he whispered, “If you came here for Prince Luca and are doing all of this to see him, I will hold you to the greatest contempt you could ever imagine.”

YOU’RE wrong.

The buzzing intensified.

“Wrong. You’re wrong. You’ve got it all wrong!” she shouted deliriously at the Rhad in her thoughts as she gripped the edge of the pool. A lump was stuck in her throat. Her diaphragm refused to move correctly, blocking her airway. She wanted to breathe air in and out, but her paralyzed body wouldn’t listen.

“Wrong...I didn’t mean it that way...” her lips moved, but without air the words came out as frantic gasps. Blurriness and tears filled her vision when she forced her eyes open. Amid her rapidly graying vision, all she could see was Rhad looking at her with the utmost contempt. And then she lost consciousness.

Chapter 40

AWAKING from fainting always comes with an abrupt shock to the brain and body. A lost grip on reality, and the five senses rushing back all at once add to the shock. Extremities are chilled from a lack of circulating blood and the body trembles relentlessly. It takes a few minutes for the person who blacked out to register what happened. Why were they laying on the floor shaking? What was the throbbing sensation in their head?

“Nngh?”

Yuki woke up alarmed by the softness of a bed—she expected to find herself on the washhouse’s stone floor. Fingers shaking and cold from passing out, she groped around to make sure her sense of touch still worked.

Her eyes snapped open to see a ceiling instead of the sky. The unfamiliarity of the ceiling told her she wasn’t in the room allotted to her in Fol Castle. Slowly, she sat up, her hair tumbling down her shoulders—someone had let it out of the ponytail. She racked her dazed mind to remember what happened.

What happened after I blacked out? She remembered up until she lost consciousness. *That’s weird, I can’t remember.* Trying to recall what happened led only to a painful, blackness left by passing out.

“Yuki, you fainted in the washhouse.”

“Selena?”

Selena sat at the foot of her bed. “You should watch the way you groan and moan when you first wake up. You sounded like an old lady,” Selena joked and then continued on a serious note, “Vigo was here a little while ago. He said you passed out from overexertion.”

“Overexertion...”

“Well, a piece of it is definitely you working yourself ragged, but the greater fault lies with Vigo. He acts like it has nothing to do with him too.” Selena

stroked Yuki's hair and pushed a lock behind her ears.

"What do you mean the greater fault is Vigo's?"

"Mm, the easiest explanation is he's making you do all the work, Yuki."

"What's wrong with that? I'm the one who asked for this! He's not at fault!"

They stayed longer in Fol because of her selfish request. Despite knowing Vigo had business in the capital, Yuki pled with them to adjust their plans to her whims. She kept telling herself she had to work ten times as hard to make up for it.

"...Oh gosh. Why must you be so lovable?" Selena crooned, running her hands through Yuki's hair. "Yuki, aren't you hopelessly wrestling with your desire to go to the capital to see your Knight?"

Those few nonchalant words brought all of Yuki's tension back and knotted her stomach. Her hands curled around the blanket and squeezed.

Don't say that to me.

She had to constantly chant not to think about Luca. The more her thoughts went to him, the more apprehension weighed on her urge to rush to his side. A desire to run off to the capital abandoning the patients who smiled at her and the soldiers who did well by her surged through her with every thought about Luca.

Luca, her precious Violet Knight who was locked away somewhere like a common thief in a dungeon. Luca, the man whose thoughts and actions she could never read. Luca, the only friend she had in this world who she had turned her back on and ran from. Luca, the prince everyone said hadn't awakened from sleep for months.

Don't force me to think about him. Anxiety crushed her heart and her with it. She'd lose her ability to cope if she thought of him.

"You should just go to him."

"...I can't...not yet." Her nails pierced through the thin blanket. She tried to unlatch her hands, but they were shaking too hard to loosen.

I can't.

Yuki came to Aridol looking like a child and acting like one. She didn't know why she came to their world. Aside from being from another world, she didn't know what she was or why she possessed violet eyes. She had neither a place to live nor a way to return home. The patients and soldiers put their wholehearted trust in her when she had nothing. How could she toss them aside?

But her thoughts were an excuse. More than anything else, she was *afraid*.

How many months had passed since she ran from Luca into the forest where the boy was killed and Orga captured her? The people she wanted to reunite with may have forgotten about her since then. They might not have had the time to think about her. Or maybe they hated her for what she did.

What if she had taken too long to come to the capital and they shooed her away at the gates? What if they said she didn't matter to them? What bonds did they really have? What did they actually know about each other? Yuki was too afraid to take action when she thought of all the things that could go wrong.

I'm awful...I'm full of excuses... I keep saying I can't go because of this person or another or an obstacle gets in my way, but in the end aren't I just protecting myself by not going? The realization was agonizing and sent her spiraling down the abyss of depression.

"You should just go," Selena repeated. Yuki shook her head and kept her eyes trained on the blanket.

I want to see him. But I don't want to see him.

Selena sighed beside her. It was a conflicted sigh. Yuki waited for her to say something. "You know, Vigo said he has something to discuss with you as a reward for all your hard work... He should drop by soon," Selena said in a dreadfully kind voice. The way she stroked Yuki's hair was kind too, causing Yuki to hate herself further for giving in to her kindness.

"You have been working yourself to death to see your Knight, and I don't even know when you started. But I do know you have been doing your best for his sake. Even oblivious Vigo knows... You can proudly go find your Knight now," Selena announced, as though she had seen through Yuki's thoughts. Yuki jerked her head toward her.

“I...haven’t been doing my best,” she said in a ghost of a voice.

“That’s not true,” she consoled, patting the top of her head.

“I only ever think of myself,” her barely audible objection was erased by the creak of the opening door.

Vigo entered the room and gave her a deal she couldn’t refuse.

SELENA watched Yuki gallop away from Fol Castle on her horse. Once she was out of sight, she turned to her Master.

“Yuki was in a real rush to leave. I wonder if you had something to do with that, Vigo.” Selena smiled at him. He frowned and groaned. “Her Knight is in quite the predicament too. For him to have been in a state of sleep for months on end...was he actually placed under a curse?” she guessed. Vigo stayed silent, a tortured look on his face.

“What? Beating yourself up now?” she teased. He swiveled around to glare at her—she had hit a sore spot. Vigo only gave Yuki ten days.

“YOU have ten days,” Vigo told her when the Selena left the room.

“What?” Yuki asked from bed.

“I’ll only wait for you for ten days. Bring your Knight back within that time.”

“I will!” Yuki answered without hesitation. She didn’t have time to waste wallowing in ifs and buts. She leapt out of bed and rushed to make the bare minimum preparations as fast as she could.

“TEN days is the limit,” Vigo confessed, tugging on his thick beard. “I don’t mind if I’m called heartless and cruel for this...”

Oh dear.

“No matter how I calculated the numbers, ten days came out as the max. No, when I took into consideration the possibility of her coming back late, I couldn’t let her have the real limit.” Vigo dropped his gaze to his folded arms. “However

much medicine we have, it means nothing without her power. We won't be able save them all. I'm not even sure we can save ten percent without her. If the little lady disappears from us now, the people infected with the Ten Day Fever in Fol will most likely die without her."

A self-derisive smile crossed his sunken face. "I'm a doctor. I can't think of anything aside from saving patients. I'm using a foolish little girl, knowing her power is likely chiseling away at her very life. Even if she turns out to be Rvydom's princess, I would use Rvydom's princess as a tool to save lives."

Vigo was being uncharacteristically garrulous. Did he just want to get it off his chest? Or was this his attempt at repentance? Selena neither knew nor cared.

"I wanted to remain disconnected from Fol. I have to save people once I get involved. The nature of a doctor is coming back to bite me.... In the first place, I have no right to keep her restrained here or to set a limit for how long she can go to the capital. Rifaenotis and Galian entrusted her into my care and this is the result. I'm using her as a witch-cursed tool," he laughed dryly. It was an eerily hallow laugh.

"...I'm fortunate no one has told her about her ability or status.... Do you hold me in disdain now?" Vigo spat, blankly looking nowhere in particular.

What a cruel man. Did he believe he was hurting Selena with what he said? He wouldn't look her in the eyes. *He really is sly.*

Did he think she was a woman who could listen to him bare his heart to her and not feel something? Or was this all a part of some perfectly calculated plan?

Unlikely. Vigo isn't the type to manipulate people.

Knowing this awkward man couldn't do something as skillful as manipulate with false emotions was exactly why her heart ached for him. He was exposing the darkness he kept hidden inside. A smile touched her face at his forlorn state. A smile wasn't enough, laughter shook her shoulders.

"I'm your Knight."

The laughter in her voice must have seemed odd to him, because Vigo finally glanced over at her.

“I’ll at least put my opinion out there, but I won’t reject your opinion. Nor do I ever want to go against your orders.” Vigo remained unblinking, so she continued, “I love Yuki, you know? She’s the spitting image of Lord Cahn with her honesty, sincerity, and kindness. She’s the most precious and adorable thing. I love her.”

Silence answered her in the room. Inside the freezing room only Yuki’s bed seemed to give off warmth—just like the coldness of their lives.

“I love her, but that doesn’t matter. I won’t blame you if your actions lead to her death. Even if Yuki turns out to truly be our princess.”

“...That’s a horrible thing to say.”

“Is it? Isn’t that how it is between Knight and Master? I am your sword and your shield.” Vigo finally looked her in the eyes and she smiled. “And I am a dog whose Master’s orders are absolute. At least that’s how it is for me.”

Vigo’s eyes widened and he dropped his gaze from hers again.

Mad dog...eh?

It had been a long time since she last referred to herself as a dog. Selena didn’t hate being called a dog. In all actuality, she used to take pride in it.

Since when? Since when did the word ‘dog’ start to take on various meanings? Since when did I start hating being called one? She reflected on the sentiment for a while until she realized it was a pointless venture and cast away the thought.

The descending sun had taken on an orange hue. The light did nothing for the two of them in the cold room—it only seemed to shine on the now empty bed whose owner had brought Selena such warmth and joy.

“...I’m a loyal dog,” she whispered, making excuses to no one.

Chapter 41

FASTER. Even Faster. If only this world had a bullet train. If only they had a plane. With those wishes deep in her heart, Yuki gripped her horse's reins as his hooves raced across dirt, gravel, and grass on the way to the capital. The horse breathed heavily through his nose, overexertion catching up to him from holding a fast pace.

I'm sorry, but we have to hurry.

She flattened her legs against his torso and squeezed. Keeping the same riding position for hours meant the moment she relaxed she would find herself tossed off his back.

"I heard from the officer here that Fourth Prince Lucat has been unconscious for months," Vigo had said when he visited Yuki in her room.

"He's been unconscious? Why? How?!"

"Beats me. The royal doctors have given up on him. Rumors say he's under some Witch's curse. Either way, being unconscious for so long will have weakened him. It's a surprise he's still alive."

"...!"

"You can't live long without eating or drinking. The fact he's still alive is a miracle...or a curse."

"Vigo..."

"You have ten days."

"What?"

"I'll bring Luca back with me before the ten days are up," she swore to herself.

The last time she came to Fol from Adolunde Castle it took a little less than a week. But she had traveled by horse carriage at the time. If memory served her,

some of the soldiers accompanying them had been on foot.

Traveling alone by horse should get me there in half the time.

Round trip should take about six days traveling by horse. The remaining four days would be used to find Luca and get him out of whatever hell he was in.

I have to plan for the possibility of the return taking longer than three days because of his weakened state. I might not even have four days to find him. I have to hurry!

The horse's hooves clopped loudly as it kicked up a dust storm.

YUKI didn't stop to sleep. She only took a half-hour break here and there throughout the day to water and feed her horse before remounting and racing onward. Anemia hit her in waves during the ride. Her consciousness came and went, but she managed to cling to the horse without falling off. The night of the second day she arrived in Adolunde.

The late hour made it impossible to find an open inn. Extreme exhaustion had her decide to camp outside once she arrived on the outskirts of the capital. She stopped when she found woods along her path and tied her horse to a tree. Once she laid out food and water for him, she found a pile of leaves a little ways away and slept. When she woke the next morning, the horse was *gone*.

"...Is this some kind of joke?" She struggled to her feet, her muscles aching in protest with every wobbly step to where she had tied her loyal steed. She stared at the place he had been with despair.

How the heck am I supposed to get back? She cursed herself for her stupid decision to camp outside alone—for not sleeping next to her horse. *I should have pushed through the exhaustion and pounded on doors until an inn took me in. How much does a horse cost? Would the money I have on me be enough?* She snorted. *As if. It doesn't even come close. What if I hire a carriage? How long would that take?*

The more she weighed her options the more difficult it became to find the right choice.

“...Oh well. What’s done is done.” Matters wouldn’t be resolved by that remark, but she determined she wouldn’t get anywhere berating herself for what had passed. “Now that it’s come to this, I’ll just have to make Luca give me a horse or two for the journey back! Luca is a prince. That should be worth something!” she shouted, trying to rouse herself out of depression and into action. “Why, I should be thankful they didn’t take my stuff too! Okay! What the heck do I do now?!”

Yuki had used her jute bag and quiver as a pillow, saving them from the wretched thieves who took her horse. Why didn’t they attack her? Maybe they wanted an easy steal without the hassle of killing someone. Or it was possible they hadn’t seen her under the pile of leaves she used as a blanket.

Pulling her quiver and bag onto her shoulders, she jumped to her feet and deliberately stood in a thinking pose with her finger tapping against her lips.

“...First things first, since Rhad knew where Luca is, he must be at the castle! Staying asleep for months in some room in a castle sounds like Sleeping Beauty,” she laughed loudly. The misty woodlands fell terrifyingly silent once her laughter stopped. Without her horse, loneliness tugged at her. “Seriously, what are you sleeping for?”

Aren’t thing usually done in the reverse? The prince should come to rescue the princess. The straggler the prince picked up shouldn’t have to come rescue him. She vented internally to scare off the melancholy threatening to shatter her resolve to trudge on. She took several deep, steadying breaths.

“To the castle we go!” She gripped her right hand and glared at the tall castle spires jutting out in the distance.

TWO days had passed since Yuki arrived in Adolunde’s capital city. Five days had passed since she left Fol.

“I knew it wouldn’t be easy, but still...” she lamented. She slumped down on the edge of a preposterously large water fountain and hung her head in utter defeat. “And I thought I was going to get turned away at the gates, but instead I’m being completely shunned...”

The spread of the Ten Day Fever and the stagnant war had brought a world of difference to the vibrant royal capital she saw nearly a year ago. A heavy cloud of gloominess hung over the people now. The people walking by glimpsed Yuki's appearance and ran away in haste. If they weren't hastening away, they gave her pitying stares and shook their heads. The royal capital didn't welcome vagrants—and with only her jute bag, quiver, and dirty clothes, Yuki fit the bill.

I wonder if the gate guards thought I came to beg for scraps...

Yuki was smart enough to know not to bring up Luca's name and ask for an audience with him. But how could she get inside the castle without saying anything?

"Bleaagh," she sighed loudly. Keeping the pressure built up inside her would only crush her. She needed to vent. "Aaah! What the heck is so great about a prince?! Is he really all that special?! His wicked, demented older brother is keeping him protected inside those great big walls too!" She glared at the castle. "Seriously, what the heck..."

A vise squeezed around her heart. Invisible scars burned and tingled like a fresh wound. She could almost smell the seared flesh again as the memories flooded her. She clawed at her chest and bit the inside of her cheek to divert the waves of merciless pain.

What the heck?!

Breathing became difficult and painful. She inhaled shallow, shuddery breaths. She tried several times to breathe slowly, but it came for her anyway.

It's back.

The chills crawled up her spine and through her neck to her brain, icing everything in its path—the first symptom of her fainting spells she had grown grossly accustomed to these past few months. Blood drained from her face and with it her brain stopped functioning correctly. The organs in her body seemed to stop working. The bustling noises of the city increased in volume, but it sounded like someone had stuck the speaker underwater. White flecked her vision.

I can't collapse now. Frantically, she fought with herself to keep it together.

Putting her head in her hands, she shut her eyes. The world spun relentlessly. Was she the one spinning or was it everything else? Where was she sitting? What was she doing? Everything became fuzzy to her.

What the heck?

No longer could she deny there was nothing wrong with her body as her condition gradually deteriorated over the weeks. The fainting spells had grown more frequent and more deadly ever since she first blacked out at the orphanage near Rifaenotis' cabin. She fainted inside Fol Castle on more than several occasions—it was impossible for Vigo and Selena to have not known about her poor health.

Yuki was traveling with a doctor, she could have asked him about her health and what she could do to help her condition, but she didn't out of fear they would prevent her from traveling.

...I'm scared and all alone...

The fear of an invisible silk thread wrapped around her throat suffocating her and slowly killing her continued to endlessly torment her. Despite her desperate attempts to fight back, her consciousness rapidly faded into the heartless embrace of darkness.

Chapter 42

THE spinning out of control world mixed with her vision painted over by whiteout. Everything sounded like it was projected through a loud speaker, threatening to split her head. Amid the chaos Yuki's mind was undergoing, she heard one voice clearly as if it were the voice of reason.

"What? The person has been asleep for three days straight? Since you found them collapsed in front of a water fountain...they may be a refugee. Are you willing to accept them into your facility here?" Yuki's eyes snapped open at the familiar sound of that voice. "All things considered, why am I the one stuck doing this?"

"Now, now. Just goes to show how shorthanded we are. Look on the bright side, we get out of having to take part in the sticky military affairs and our great country gets free manpower without the costs. It's a good deal."

Forgetting the pain and her poor health, Yuki shot up in bed at the speed of light. She found herself in a room lined with beds like a school's health office. The other beds appeared unused. Voices came from right outside the room. Their voices traveled easily through the thin walls.

"I understand why you have to do it, Gys. You are still a boarding student, but I am a royal advisor..."

"Don't calmly dis me, you bloody elite! The great thing about debase jobs like these is that they have a way of giving birth to better jobs and encounters!"

"...I'm aware you do your work with ulterior motives, but I think you should be careful announcing it to the world."

"C'mon, lighten up, man! Who knows, the refugee could be a cutie!"

Someone tossed the door open.

"Oh, looks like our guest is awake." A young man with dark-brown hair and devilish facial features gawked at Yuki. Curiosity gleamed in his eyes. Yuki

couldn't take her eyes from the young man wearing glasses behind him.

"...Ain..." The name slipped from her lips like a drop of water on an eerily silent lake.

"What? Ain is this someone you know?" asked the other man with an out-of-place cheeriness.

A surprised Ain entered the room. Upon spotting Yuki, his brow furrowed quizzically. "I am Ain, but...who are you?" He carefully looked her over, but was puzzled when she didn't match anyone he knew.

"It's me! You might not believe me because of how I look right now, but I'm Yuki! Yuki! I came to see Luca," she said quickly. Then it finally occurred to her.

Why didn't I think of this until now? It's obvious Ain would be in Adolunde! Ain is Luca's civil advisor and his close aide!

"Have you already met up with Nasette and Tita? Where is everybody?" Yuki asked with a smile.

How nostalgic! Is everyone back in Adolunde now? I want to see them all again!

Pure shock colored Ain's face. "...Why do you know about that?"

"What do you mean?"

Perplexed, Yuki looked herself over again. Vivi had aged her body to sixteen and changed her violet eyes to black. There were vestiges of her younger self still there, but at a glance it would be hard to think she was the one and same person.

"I know because I'm Yuki. Hear me out. After I last saw you, the Witch changed my appearance and then—"

"Please stop this nonsense!" he yelled.



Yuki flinched. Startled, she looked up to see him biting his lower lip and clenching his fists—he was pained by what she said.

...What's going on? Did I do something? Did I say too much at once?

“Yuki was executed and killed by Maruk due to my actions! Why do you even have knowledge of such a thing?! And *WHY* do you mock the deceased with your farce?!”

“Hey, Ain.” Gys grabbed Ain’s quivering shoulder. Ain’s face was red with fury. Yuki could only gape at him.

“...What?”

I...died?

“What in the world is your problem?! Who in Aridol are you?! Why do you know about Yuki?!”

“Because I am Yuki!”

“Please cease from speaking of such a thing! I don’t want to hear it!” Tears filled Ain’s large, black eyes. “I don’t want to remember anymore! And yet you come here and drudge up old wounds?! Who are you?! Is it fun poking at someone else’s pain and loss?!” he howled.

Yuki was dumbfounded by his angry yelling. “I’m...not dead.”

“...Are you possibly that Witch?”

“Ain, calm down! Okay?” Gys grabbed his arms and held them behind his back to stop him from rampaging inside the room. Bound in place, Ain glowered at Yuki with hate-filled eyes.

“You screwed with my memories making it take time for me to remember, but while I am a failure, I am still a Mage. I remembered. Why was I sheltered safely in the Northern Forest? Because you transported me there.”

“Wait, what?”

The lack of blood flowing to Yuki’s mind made it even harder for her to follow what Ain was going on about. *So basically, Ain is confusing me with Vivi?*

“Ain, you’ve got it all wr—”

Ain spoke over her, “What part do I have wrong? Then how do you explain it? You are responsible for the same crime! Why did you let Yuki die without helping her?! Why did you save me and not her?!”

Let me die?

Something felt out of place about Ain’s rage.

“Yuki was burned alive in front of my very eyes! I saw her go up in flames! Can you understand how I feel? The powerlessness of only being able to watch as a young friend is devoured by flames! The way the scent of burning flesh sticks with you and comes back every night in the form of horrific nightmares!”

Ain was under a grave, decisive misunderstanding. Yuki hadn’t been killed. As such, it was absurd for him to have seen the execution go all the way through.

“You’re wrong! Ain, listen to me!”

Ain loudly sighed. “...There is nothing for me to hear from you,” he said frostily and turned to speak to Gys over his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Gys. It is unlike me to lose my head. I’m fine now. Will you release me?”

“...You sure?”

“Yeah. She may be a Witch, so you are welcome to toss her out on the streets.” Ain fixed his dark-blue cloak and tightly said, “Be grateful I’m not having you arrested. I cannot remember the details, but it is likely you saved me. This is how I will repay you.”

“Ain! Just listen to me! You have it all wrong!” Yuki protested, fighting to kick her dazed brain into thinking of a way to make him believe her.

“I haven’t the faintest idea why you have come to Adolunde, but please return to your dwelling immediately.” Ain briskly strode over to the door. “Gys, I apologize, but I am feeling unwell today. I must return home. Please handle the rest for me.”

“S-Sure...” Gys was astounded by Ain’s sudden level-headedness and stared after him as he left the room.

“Ain!” Yuki shouted at the door slammed behind him. The instant she leapt out of bed to chase him the strength left her legs and she slumped onto the

ground. “Why?!”

She fought and fought to stand, but the strength wouldn’t enter her waist down. It was almost as if she were paralyzed.

Move! Move, you stupid legs! I have to hurry! I need to catch him, force him to hear me out, and make him understand that I am Yuki! And then...I need to ask him about Luca! Shouldn’t Ain know where he is and how he’s doing?

Yuki put her hands on the edge of the bed and clung to the mattress to try and pull herself up. All her yanking amounted to was pulling the blankets off the bed.

“...It’s pointless to try.” Having utterly forgotten about Gys, Yuki looked up at him in surprise. Staring at her with pity in his eyes, he walked over to where she had fallen. “That guy’s as stubborn as they come. He’s usually got his head in the clouds, but once he flips his top he becomes impossible to reason with. I haven’t seen him lose it in ages. Well, once he sleeps he’ll go back to normal though,” Gys said as he put his arms underneath Yuki’s armpits. He lifted her and sat her on the bed.

“You were out cold for three days. You went three days without eating or drinking. It’s no wonder you can’t move. You’ve got the complexion of a corpse.” Gys’ jade-green eyes searched Yuki’s. The friendliness he showed her meant he didn’t believe Ain—he neither feared nor took preemptive action toward Yuki who Ain dubbed a Witch.

“Ain said something about you being a Witch, but I’ve never heard of a Witch looking like she’s on death’s door. Well, I have to say I’m curious why you know about Ain’s affairs though.” A sharp glint reflected from his beautiful eyes. Kindness filled his tone, but his eyes pierced through her, searching for the truth.

They can doubt me all they like, but I was the victim he mourns for. I was there for the execution and the escape. How could I not know? But what good would it do her to say those things aloud? As she held her tongue, her stomach quietly gurgled. It took that sound for her to realize she was hungry.

Oh yeah, when did I last eat?

"You were out cold for three days."

"Three days?!" she accidentally shouted when she remembered what Gys said. Gys jumped at her abrupt shout. "Wait a minute. Three days means..."

It took me three days to get here. I spent three days looking. How many days will my return take? Plus, I lost my horse. How much money do I have left?

Yuki frantically started searching for her bag. She sighed when she spotted the jute bag and quiver sitting beside the bed. Then her mind returned to ruminating over how long it would take to get to Fol without a horse. No matter how she worked her numbers, there weren't enough days left. Traveling by horse carriage would take a week.

"...I haven't even found any clues about Luca either..." she muttered.

This is frustrating! Why did I sleep for three straight days? Poor health is nothing more than an excuse. Resentment and guilt knotted her stomach.

"Luca? Are you talking about Prince Lucat? Prince Lucat is holed away in the castle. I heard he's assisting Prince Orga with government affairs?"

"You did?"

"It seems like he's buried under his workload because I haven't seen him since his return to the capital. What do you need clues for? What are you plotting?"

Yuki was speechless.

Luca is...living normally? That fact was shocking. But Rhad told her Luca had been sleeping for months. Yuki considered the possibility of him waking up while she slept, but Gys' tone made it sound as if he had been functioning normally all along.

Someone was manipulating and fabricating information.

But who?

Rifaenotis said he was locked somewhere like a dungeon. Rhad said he had been unconscious for months. Gys said he was assisting Orga with government affairs. Just thinking through the facts sent her fried brains into another dizzy spell. She was forced to see just how unapproachable and out of reach Luca was to someone like her.

What was true? What was false? She found herself in a vortex of thick fog. Where should she go? What should she do? She couldn't even begin to guess.

Regardless, I have to go.

Something stirring Yuki to action kept pushing at her back. Her heart whispered she had to ride on with the tailwind directing her. In a world of lies and falsities, she had to grope around for the truth and drag it out of the grime. Putting all her strength into her hands, she shoved herself off the bed. Her blood must have started pumping again, because the numbness left her legs and they held her up.

"What are you doing?" Gys asked in a suspicious tone when she suddenly started moving. Yuki pretended not to hear him as she snatched up her jute bag, quiver, and bow.

"Ain told you to toss me onto the streets, so I will take my leave here. Thank you for your care," she said and headed for the door. Not eating or drinking for three days led to her walking like she was a drunk, but she couldn't waste her time on such a thing.

"Hang on! Oi! I don't get you!"

Yuki wrapped her hand around the doorknob. It wouldn't budge when she yanked on it, so she pressed her body against it and pushed—the door finally opened. She was astonished her stamina and energy levels had dropped so low. On the other side of the opened door stood a girl of ten with black hair and rounded green eyes. A tray of food rested on her hands. Realizing the food was for her, Yuki smiled.

"Thank you. But I don't need food. Thank you for everything you did for me during these three days."

The girl peered up at Yuki and gave a small nod.

Get a grip on yourself! She scolded her legs, which seemed as if they would give out on her the moment she let down her guard and made her way outside the building.

In the distance it sounded as if someone were cackling inside her head.

Chapter 43

DASHING out of the clinic was all fine and dandy, but Yuki hadn't a clue about what she should do next. She smiled dryly at her impulsiveness and squinted at the sun blaring down on her from the center of the blue sky.

"All right...where to go from here?"

Heaviness weighed down her body and her legs didn't move as she willed them. The seasons had changed again, because the brush of a gentle breeze sent shivers through her even though the sun was still high in the sky.

Neither time nor information was on her side. Her deteriorating health didn't help either. Still, for some unknown reason, her mind was in a tranquil state.

"I'll start with the bars. Luca always said bars are the best place to obtain information."

Yuki worried whether the bars would be open during the day, but if they were closed she would just get some food and wait until they opened.

I'll ask about where to find a horse and the fastest way back to Fol. I'll keep my promise with Vigo and return to Fol and seek out Rhad's help. I don't know if he'll believe me or if he's trustworthy. Yuki shook her head. *No, I have to trust him first for him to believe me.* With her newfound determination, she glowered at the capital's streets brimming with people going about their daily lives.

Since the day Luca saved her in the spring, Yuki had been blessed by the people she met. Dropped into a world she knew nothing about, she fell right in front of a powerful nation's prince. Or rather, she drowned in front of him.

Had she been unlucky, she could have been picked up by a poor family and lived out the rest of her days in slavery and prostitution. The uniqueness of her eyes would have gotten her sold off. Some twisted sicko could have fallen in love with her eyes, removed them from their sockets, and left her to die on the

side of the road never seeing the light of day again.

When she considered the alternatives of who could have found her she was convinced she had been blessed. Perhaps a better word than blessed would be fortunate. Yuki reflected on her amazing good luck inside Selena's tight embrace.

"Aaah, sheesh, Yuki! You're a bit slow when it comes to noticing things, but you're a clever girl! As ashamed as I am to admit it, I lost sight of you. But I was certain you would come to the tavern! I've been waiting here for three days and my efforts have finally paid off!"

The second Yuki stepped inside the tavern she spotted Selena dressed not in her Knight armor, but wearing a navy dress. Selena leapt for her from the other side of the tavern and scooped her up in her arms.

"After you left for the capital, Vigo sent me after you because he thought it'd be dangerous for you alone. But you're a speed demon, Yuki! I wasn't able to catch up to you in time! It's all Vigo's fault for keeping me at Fol Castle for so long after you left!"

"S-Selena! I-I understand how you feel, but you're hurting me! I'm suffocating!" Yuki coughed out.

Selena's arms squeezed her with the strength of a Knight and her voluptuous chest cut off her airflow. Several pops and snaps came from Yuki's back as her bones struggled under the pressure. She sucked in a deep breath when Selena loosened her grip.

"So, how did it go? Did you find your Knight?" Selena asked, patting Yuki on the head. Yuki shook her head.

"I was just puzzling through what to do because everyone has different information on what Luca is doing right now."

Selena watched Yuki force a smile with compassion. "I see."

"Yeah."

Undoubtedly, Selena saw the spasm in her cheek as her smile faltered. She was grateful she didn't press for more information.

“At any rate, your ten days will be up soon. Why don’t we head back to Fol for now?”

“...All right.”

Head back to Fol for now. Those words meant she could return to the capital again. Yuki clenched her right hand. The sooner she returned the better.

“Let’s go back soon,” she insisted. Selena smiled.

“I love your impatience. But that Adolunde Knight came here with me. Sounded like he has something to do here. Let’s depart as soon as he returns. More importantly,” Selena paused and pinched the tip of Yuki’s nose, “Have you been eating? You look whiter than a cloud.” She forced the tavern menu into Yuki’s hands.

SELENA ordered more food than the two-seater table could hold and pestered Yuki to eat it. By the time they finished their meal—most of which Selena ate—Rhad entered the tavern, his copper ponytail swaying behind him. The long ponytail hung loosely at the middle of his back.

“Oh, you’re back pretty quick. I thought you said you wouldn’t be back until just before noon,” Selena said, waving in greeting.

“I had a hard time trying to get in touch with the person I came to meet. He was in a sour mood when I finally did get my hands on him, which made a mess of things.” Rhad deliberately shrugged and turned serious when he spotted Yuki. “By the way, I need to ask her something.”

“Who? M-Me?” Yuki asked, shrinking back in her chair. She hadn’t spoken to Rhad since their fight about Luca. Baffled by his absolute contempt for her, she kept her distance.

“Then ask?” Selena gestured to an empty chair at another table.

“The topic is something I prefer to keep between us, ma’am.”

“Did you forget Yuki is in our care and not yours?”

“It is in your best interest not to refuse me. Who knows, I may have a slip of the tongue and reveal Rvydom’s infamous Mad Dog Selena Beautante has

infiltrated the capital.”

Yuki nervously watched them argue with perfect smiles on their faces until Selena raised her hands in defeat.

“Okay, okay. I’ll throw in the towel. Sheesh, you’re such a weasel.” Selena hopped out of her chair and smiled at Yuki. “I’ll be waiting right outside, Yuki. Come out once you finish here. Yell at the top of your lungs if he tries anything funny. I’ll take care of him for you.”

“Selena!”

Selena strut out of the tavern laughing. Left in her wake were piles of empty dishes and the tense air between Yuki and Rhad. Uneasy, Yuki’s eyes darted toward every shadow in the tavern, a sense of unease creeping within her while Rhad calmly took Selena’s empty seat opposite of her.

“Don’t be so uneasy with me. You’re making me uneasy just looking at you.”

“Ah, I’m sorry...”

“Apologizing makes me uneasy too. I’m the one who wanted to apologize here too.”

“You did?” Yuki stopped looking around the room and looked at him. There was pensiveness to his smile.

“Sorry about the other day. You caught me in a foul mood. I said some terrible things to you.”

Yuki shook her head and folded her hands on her lap. “I think what you said was the typical conclusion most people would come to.”

The memory of the day stabbed at her, but she offered a cordial smile.

“No, I truly am sorry. I had a breakdown because my fiancée passed away. I said things I didn’t really mean.”

My fiancée passed away. The young man who said those words was smiling in front of her. Did the Ten Day Fever take her? Or had she been a victim of the war? Yuki’s heart broke for the stouthearted Rhad who didn’t even have the time to lose himself in mourning for his deceased love.

“Umm...”

What was the correct thing to say to someone at a time like this? Having never lost anyone close to her before, Yuki could only think of clichéd words of comfort. Was it not ruder to act funny because of knowing? Yuki mulled and pondered over how to speak to him, when her thoughts were broken by a burst of laughter across from her. Surprised, she looked up to find Rhad laughing.

“I never thought you’d actually believe me.”

“Did you just trick me?! I can’t believe you would joke about someone dying!” she exploded. The daunted look on her face only got him to casually wave his hand.

“It’s an effective method in getting someone to feel for you emotionally. Especially when it comes to men and women,” he added.

“...I can’t believe you’d stoop so low.”

“That’s right, doll. You’d do best not to trust me,” he said in a sweet tenor that cut through the buzzing chatter of other patrons.

“What are you getting at?”

Rhad only ever joked around, making his thoughts and what he said hard to follow. Not understanding him frustrated her.

“You can’t trust me, sweetheart. I can’t trust you. We’re of equal status in this regard, no?”

She opened her mouth to tell him that’s not what she meant, but the lack of smile reaching his eyes had her obediently keep her mouth shut.

“Let me be frank. I want to know the relationship between you and Prince Lucat,” he said in a harsh tone. She flinched.

“Excuse me?”

“You ran into Revent, didn’t you?”

Revent. Yuki frowned at the unfamiliar name.

“Ain Revent,” Rhad supplied.

“If you are talking about the same Ain then...yes, I saw him.”

Although Ain refused to acknowledge Yuki as Yuki.

“Revent was all shaken up because you mentioned the Liberat siblings. And by the fact you knew Prince Lucat’s Master’s name when it’s classified information.”

Rhad was trying to learn what Yuki knew. Once he learned it, she wasn’t sure how he would react.

I want him to believe me. Believe what I say...and who I am.

Was her knowledge something she should share with Rhad? Yuki didn’t have the appropriate information to make that judgment. Rhad claimed he was Luca’s subordinate. But she couldn’t shake the idea he might be a spy. The thought crossed her mind he might be someone set in place by Orga.

But Ain opened up to him. If Ain tells him things, then it’s a safe bet I can tell him.

Yuki took a deep breath and looked straight at Rhad. “You probably won’t believe me, but I am Luca’s Master.”

Rhad didn’t move an inch. His expression didn’t falter. He carefully studied Yuki’s face as if to ascertain he didn’t miss a single tell from her.

“We contracted and immediately headed for Fol. We subjugated Fol Castle and captured Isis. Next, we went to Cele and rescued Dante,” Yuki summarized.

She debated whether she should tell him the rest. What was going through Rhad’s head as he watched her? Without realizing it, she was gripping her right hand to her chest.

“...On our way back to Adolunde...I was captured by Orga.” Rhad’s eyebrow twitched. “They decided to execute me as the Legendary Witch. Ain was captured and brought to the execution site to watch me burn,” she spoke the facts, her tongue feeling like lead.

The sheer memory of those days brought the searing pain back. The mob’s hate-filled eyes and the cloying scent of flowers were burned into her brain and wouldn’t go away.

“It was there Ain and I were saved by a Witch. And the Witch changed my

appearance. She said it's a game. She'll turn me back to normal if I find Luca. After that I just wandered around until I found my way to Adolunde," she explained. Rhad snorted.

"...That's a tasteless work of fiction. But if it's true, you've got quite the absurd story."

"It's not fiction! Although I truly wish it were..."

All of it was true. How wonderful would it have been if it could all be chalked up to a fictional imagining? Irritation over him not believing her and depression over being laughed at, dropped like a weight to the pit of her stomach.

"All of it's the truth..."

"...I was present during Luca's contract bonding. I don't mind believing your story if you can tell me what happened then."

"What?"

"There were no servants present or a chance for anyone else to come onto the scene. If you can still explain the events of that day to me, I'll believe what you said is true."

Yuki stared at Rhad. What was his game? What he said changed by the minute, leaving her in the dust over what he wanted to say. Was he really going to believe her? Wouldn't he just snort at her again? She had little choice but to explain the events of that day if she wanted a chance of him believing her.

"I had the appearance of a ten-year-old with violet eyes...and I was wearing red heelless shoes. I had on a pinkish gown and Ain led me into a ginormous hall."

She knew even less back then than she did now. Knowing neither her left from her right, she was dazzled by the glamour of the royal castle. To better remember the details she closed her eyes. The day nostalgically unfolded in her memories.

"When I arrived on the stairs, Orga sat on the landing behind me and Luca was several stairs below... Luca came up and knelt before me. From there I did as he instructed and took his sword—"

“I’ve heard enough.” Yuki’s eyes snapped open—Rhad’s expression held the same gentleness it had the first time they met. “Revent should have heard you out... Well, I guess we can’t blame him too much when you brought up Liberat.”

Yuki sighed with relief. Joy, reassurance, and hope filled her when she realized he believed her.

“Anyway, you found yourself in a living hell, huh?”

Yuki’s heart throbbed at his soft, gorgeous smile. “Ah, yeah...”

“Please allow me to confirm one final thing with you,” he said with a new formality.

“What is it?”

Rhad continued with a smile, “What do you think about Prince Orga?”

The abruptness of his question took her by surprise, but she answered him with a soured expression and bitterness on her tongue, “Orga is a psychopath.”

Rhad laughed.

Chapter 44

AFTER returning to Fol, Yuki was sucked back into the pattern of hustling around Fol Castle giving orders. A trip to the castle town showed it to be a completely different place from when they first arrived—people were free to walk around at any time of day. Occasionally people could be seen out during the night hours known as the Witch’s Hour, though not as many as there were during the afternoon. Fol had unquestionably regained its vigor.

Yuki stomped on wet clothes in the washhouse with several women. People who had recovered from the Ten Day Fever started volunteering their time to serve at the castle. Thanks to the influx of helping hands, Yuki’s workload drastically decreased and she even had the occasional break.

“...But you know, Selena...”

“Hmm?”

Yuki addressed Selena without looking at her where she sat on the pool edge just watching Yuki and the other women splashing around in the water, “I get the feeling the number of patients isn’t decreasing... If anything, they’re only increasing. Is it just my imagination?”

With the influx of people, the amount of work she had to manage on her own had decreased, but the overall workload seemed to triple by the day.

“That’s true. The number of people in Fol has increased.”

“The number of people in Fol? Did the people who fled Fol come back or something? That’s a good thing then,” Yuki commented.

Selena swirled her fingers in the water with a conflicted look. “There’s probably some truth to those words, but the biggest reason for the influx is different.”

Yuki stopped stomping on the sheets. “What do you mean?”

Selena sighed like she didn't want to explain. "Is there even a need to explain? Haven't you realized it, Yuki? Didn't you notice the *trend* in the types of people who have been coming here lately?" she emphasized on a staccato.

Yuki cocked her head in puzzlement. Selena sighed at her. "I guess that's one of the things I find so nice about you... You don't expect people to have ulterior motives and accept them exactly as they present themselves. Listen closely, okay? The majority of people coming lately are nobles! Haven't you noticed the increase in people prattling on about the luxury of wanting a room to themselves?! Those are all nobles!"

"Nobles?"

"Yes! You might not know this, but nobles are people from families who live in the castle, deal with government affairs, and hold all sorts of high positions in life."

"I see..."

Nobles don't change much even in another world, Yuki concluded internally.

"I have no doubt noble families caught wind of rumors about the doctor staying at Fol Castle being able to cure the Ten Day Fever and have sent their infected family members as patients."

"Wow. Is that what's happening? Do rumors spread so easily here?"

"You don't get it!" Selena exclaimed, jabbing her finger toward Yuki. "The humans we call nobles have a world of time on their hands! They've got nothing to do! They don't have to fret about their next meal or where they'll sleep like the commoners do. They just stay in their mansions studying and use gossip as the sugar to sweeten up their opulent tea parties!"

"Heh," Yuki responded dumbly.

"Well, I guess you could say it's thanks to them? We've benefited greatly from the food and supplies the nobles donate to us. But I still can't help thinking the abrupt increase in nobles is strange..." Selena frowned.

Yuki stepped out of the pool, wiped her feet off with a dry cloth, and sat beside her. "What's strange about it?" Selena didn't answer her. "Selena?"

Yuki leaned over and peered at her face. Selena turned only her eyes to the sky before suddenly spinning around and grinning at Yuki. “This isn’t a conversation we can have here. Do you have plans after this, Yuki? Why don’t we have tea? You don’t look too good. You look whiter than the clean sheets. I’m sure you still have work to do, but let’s take a break together.” She elegantly stood from the ledge.

“Huh? Um, okay?”

Yuki left the rest of the washing to the other women and let Selena tug her out of the washhouse.

“**ARE** you going to explain what this is all about?”

In one of Rhad’s private rooms—now taken over by Vigo and Selena as their office and break room—Selena, Vigo, Yuki, and Rhad sat around a table drinking tea.

Rhad answered Selena with indifference from where he sat beside Vigo, “I can’t explain anything when you suddenly summon me and abruptly ask questions without context.” He shrugged.

“There are several things we want to ask you. First, our food concerns have been set at ease because of the recent donations made by the nobles, but how were you compensating for the quick decrease in supplies before their arrival?” Selena asked, holding her index finger up.

“I took from my own supplies.”

Further pressing on the matter let them learn the Mende Family was a powerful noble family and Rhad had been taking from his family’s reserves. Yuki scrutinized him from where she sat diagonally across from him—his nobility was news to her. Selena and Vigo showed no outward signs of surprise over the revelation.

Selena took a long sip of her tea and set it down on the saucer, taking her sweet time before saying, “...Recently, there have been a lot of Adolunde’s nobility among our patients. Fol is still too unsecure for there to be many nobles living here. Where are they coming from then?”

“Beats me. Isn’t it because they caught wind of rumors about the medical treatment here?”

“Rumors, eh? If rumors are the cause, do you know who might be spreading them?”

“Who knows? We can’t force people to keep their mouths shut. Perhaps it was some blabbermouth noble?”

Selena let out an exaggerated sigh. “...I’ll change my question then. Just what did you do when you went to Adolunde’s Royal Capital the other day? If memory serves me correctly, the nobles increased in number after our return.”

“The other day I went to my family and negotiated with them to share more supplies.”

The aromatic scent of a good black tea filled the room. Steam no longer billowed from the cups.

“...Are you trying to keep us confined to Fol?” Rhad stayed silent, a smile on his lips. “Why don’t you say something for yourself?”

Yuki sensed an icy chill come from the right of her. Selena had unleashed something. She couldn’t do anything about the bone-chilling air coming from Selena.

“I am not obligated to answer you,” Rhad said, further rubbing Selena the wrong way. “You are doing what you requested by entering this castle and healing those infected with the Ten Day Fever.” He shrugged as if to say he wasn’t doing anything wrong. “Fallen Kingdom of Rvydom’s Mad Dog and her tamer...what did you even come to Adolunde for? You’ve got guts to question me when I’m letting you act freely without asking questions.”

Vigo’s eyes widened and his hand wrapped precariously around the teacup handle. “You—”

“I know. I might not look like one, but I am a nobleman and a prince’s proxy. I have broad knowledge about the successive generations of military and famous people of note from the three nations.”

“You knew? ...Why did you stay quiet about it then?”

“Why? Let me throw a question right back at you. I don’t know what it is you’ve come here to do, but what are you going to do if your foolish questioning puts your efforts of healing the people infected with the Ten Day Fever for free at risk?” Rhad glanced at Yuki. Noticing his gaze, her eyes met his. A ghost of a smile touched his lips. “Just like you have your circumstances, I have mine. Isn’t that the way the world works?”

Circumstances... Is he implicitly referring to Luca? Yuki searched Rhad with her eyes, but his grin only widened.

“Circumstances, is it? Then the rush of Adolunde nobles coming here suits your circumstances?”

“.....”

Vigo stroked his beard contemplatively. His gaze was fixed on the center of the table. Unconcerned, Rhad reached for the sugar bowl in the middle. He used the tongs to drop two cubes of sugar into his teacup. The clanging of a spoon swirling the sugar around the cup filled the silence. Chilly air continued to emanate from Selena as she sipped at her tea and restlessly glanced at Vigo.

Vigo dropped his hand from his beard and said, “Your circumstances revolve around Prince Lucat, no?”

“What?!” Yuki nearly dropped her teacup.

Why did he bring up Luca? They shouldn’t have known Luca is a prince.

“And if they do? What is it to you?”

“From what I’ve observed, what has been happening in Fol and with the nobles all seems to be happening at your sole discretion. Why would that be? Because there are no orders from Prince Lucat for you to follow. If true, then we can surmise you haven’t had any contact with Prince Lucat either.”

“Wait. What? Why? What are you saying?” Yuki rushed out and looked around the table.

“What it all comes down to is that the prince Yuki is looking for is in a situation where even his proxy—Rhad—can’t get in contact with him. Am I right? Even if he is say, unconscious, his proxy should have the authority to see

him in person. But it doesn't look like he's even seen his face," Selena surmised and glared at Rhad.

"And he's either keeping us here because he views us as a possible threat or has some other ulterior motives... We want to know where he stands," she supplied for Yuki's benefit and returned her glare to Rhad. Yuki looked at him too.

Sick of three pairs of questioning eyes on him, Rhad lifted his shoulders in a half-shrug. "What's the big deal with you people? You have your motives. I have my motives. What does it matter if it becomes clear my motives will put you at a disadvantage? You can't do anything about it. My motives won't change if I lay them out on a shiny silver platter for you. If you get hung up worrying about every little detail you'll go bald."

"You've got a point," Vigo conceded, then frankly countered, "But all of that stands on the basis one of our motives putting the other at a disadvantage. My point in all of this is that if your motives and our motives are the same, we should cooperate."

"Huh? How could our motives be on the same page?"

"We need—no, we want to let this little lady here meet up with Prince Lucat. For that to happen we will go to any ends necessary to wake him up."

A light glinted in Rhad's eyes.

They want me to meet up with Luca? How do they know about him? How do they know about us? Doubts whirled around her head. She stared a hole through Vigo.

Noticing her surprise, Selena put her arm around her shoulder and whispered into her ear, "We heard from Rifaenotis that Prince Lucat is your Knight."

"Rifae told you?"

"We had him tell us a bit about you before we decided to take you with us."

Yuki never imagined they had that kind of conversation behind her back. She curled her hand into her skirts.

How am I so stupid? It's only natural for them to have dug into who I am

before they took me with them. I didn't realize at all.

Yuki looked around the table and noticed Rhad's eyes on her. "Wh-What's up?"

"...I want to ask you: who are these people?"

"What? You know who they are?" Yuki couldn't figure out the reason for his question, but tried to offer who they were to her. "Selena and Vigo are the people who brought me from Rvydom to Adolunde..."

"For what purpose?"

"For what? Well, they were traveling around Rvydom curing people of the Ten Day Fever and were going to Adolunde as well—"

"They are going to do the same for Adolunde? For people who are supposed to be traveling around curing the sick, they sure haven't done much traveling outside of Fol. Or is it just me?"

Yuki's mind latched onto that doubt. Now that he mentioned it, he had a point. Looking back over their time in Fol, Vigo lacked the assertiveness toward helping the people of Fol as he had for the people of Rvydom. The one who pushed for them to help Fol was Yuki.

"You should've just stayed in Rvydom then. You're both born and bred Rvydomners."

They said they had their own reasons for going to Adolunde, but Yuki couldn't remember ever hearing what those reasons were. She had no reason to pry when their situation benefited her own. Once again, she felt ashamed of her ignorance.

Vigo stroked his beard once and sighed. "As I get older, simple discussions have become foxhunts without ever catching the fox."

"I have to agree with that," Rhad conceded with a cynical smile.

"Let's stop beating around the bush. I'll be frank: Rvydom needs Prince Lucat's strength. We desire a face-to-face meeting with him," Vigo divulged and glanced at Yuki. "She is...Prince Lucat's Master."

Rhad looked at Yuki with an indecipherable expression. "Yes, I am aware."

"I thought so," Selena quipped.

Rhad sent a look her way and turned to Yuki. "Were you aware?"

"Aware of what?"

"Were you aware these people were seeking a face-to-face meeting with Prince Lucat on Rvydom's behalf?"

"I-I wasn't." Yuki shook her head and squeezed her hands on her lap.

Why? What do they need to meet with Luca for? Doubts tickled at the back of her mind. *What connection does Vigo and Selena have with Luca?*

She searched their faces for the answer.

Rhad spoke for her, "Prince Lucat's own Master wasn't aware of what you wanted. Explain yourselves." The sternness to his tone implied they had no other choice. The casual, lightheartedness he approached the conversation with until then gave way to an austere manner.

"Will you cooperate with us if we tell you?" Vigo asked.

"Depending on what you say."

"You don't leave much room for compromise."

"I am military man after all."

Vigo sighed loudly. "Fine. I'll be the one to compromise here. If telling you earns your cooperation we may make an ally out of you in the long run."

"You almost make it sound like cooperating with you would be the natural path should I hear your story."

Tired by the long conversation, Vigo rolled his aching shoulders as he said, "The war between Maruk and Adolunde will intensify soon. Rvydom will take advantage of the situation to reclaim its independence. We will have Prince Lucat's full support behind us. Lord Galian Manotant obtained the promise of Prince Lucat's backing when he was rescued by him."

"Do you have documents to prove this promise?"

"There are none. It was a verbal promise. We'll ascertain where he stands during our meeting with him."

“The probability of what you are saying holding out to be true is slim.”

“Yeah.”

Rhad fell silent. Vigo and Selena also refrained from saying more. Left out of the loop, Yuki pondered what they said.

Luca is going to back Rvydom's break for independence? Meaning he's for Rvydom going to war again. Why? War after war only leads to tragedy. What is the point of all of this?

“We are presently healing the people at Fol Castle but when the time comes we'll cease doing so,” Vigo pronounced.

“...Are you trying to drag the higher officials out of their holes? Or are you threatening me?”

“I can't deny either of those accusations.”

Rhad laughed. “Hahaha! What's this? Looks like we've got the same thing in mind.” Relaxing like the source of his tension had been severed, Rhad crossed his legs. “You know, Prince Luca's retainers such as myself want to see him as well. But his Highness—or should I say the Queen—is turning away everyone who wants an audience with him. ‘Lucat is too busy assisting us to meet with you.’ Who would believe such a blatant lie?” Rhad scowled. “Moreover, I've heard Prince Luca's condition is worsening.”

Yuki leapt to her feet, sending her chair skidding across the marble floor and flipping onto its side. A loud clatter echoed through the room. Rhad glanced at Yuki and smiled.

“And then she appeared. I had my doubts, but it's a fact you three have saved the people of Fol. So I got the idea—”

“...The royal family will get involved if the miracle of Fol Castle became known across the land?” Vigo filled in.

“Bingo.” Rhad smiled sweetly at Yuki with his handsome face. For some reason, his smile made her want to cry. “Lady Yuki, your exploits have already reached the nobles—as you could already tell—and the royal household.”

“Pardon?”

“It appears we think alike. It resulted in us remaining in Fol, but the outcome is more favorable than if we had traveled all of Adolunde.”

“Wait a minute. Vigo, is that why you had Yuki do all the work?! I can’t believe you!” Selena bellowed. Vigo pretended not to hear her as he drank his chilled tea. “Hey! Are you listening to me, Vigo?!”

“Lady Yuki, I will help you see Prince Luca in the near future. Please hold on just a little longer,” Rhad told Yuki, addressing her formally.

“R-Really? O-Okay,” she answered, flustered. The sudden change in the way he addressed her and looked at her was jarring.

“Getting back on topic. Lady Yuki’s exploits have already spread by word of mouth through the commoners. I will have you cease abusing her as a menial servant. She will continue to use her powers to care for the patients, but will be removed from all other duties. Any complaints?” Rhad asked Vigo.

“No. That will do.”

“Hey, Vigo! You can hear!” Selena fumed, whacking him on the back.

“With that decided, I will have a proper room prepared for Lady Yuki. Please bear with the short wait, m’lady.”

Yuki reflexively smiled back at Rhad. “Um—”

“Now tell me this!” Selena blew up at Rhad with her hands around Vigo’s neck. “How are you so quick at this?! You only just recently learned Yuki is Prince Lucat’s Master, right? You haven’t left for Adolunde since we returned. How did you get word to the nobles so fast?”

Rhad sighed, as if to say the answer to her question was nonsense. “Well, I have my ways. Anyway, is it all right for you to be choking your Master? Are you not Vigo’s sword, shield, and *dog*?”

“Hm?” Yuki tilted her head.

Selena turned red with fury. “Hang on! Y-Y-Y-You overheard everything we said?!”

“Aren’t you the one at fault for holding such an incriminating conversation somewhere littered with the dangers of being heard?”

“...Wait, wait, wait. Then does this mean you knew almost everything from the start?!”

“What do you think? Keeping quiet about where one learns his secrets is the way of the gentleman.”

“S-Selena?” Yuki was completely lost.

Selena put her head in her hands and yelled, “What piece of you is a gentleman?! Aaaah, for Rvydom’s sake! You are a despicable man!”

“I am quite all right being despicable. Lady Yuki, you will see Prince Luca very soon. Please do not grow impatient or depressed. Stay spirited enough to give his face a nice slap when you see him.”

“O-Okay?”

Satisfied by her response, Rhad smiled and strut out of the room.

YUKI felt as if she had been left in the dark. No matter how much she wanted to see Luca, she was grasping at straws on how to get to him. Difficulty surrounded determining what information circling around was true and what was false. It was as if she had been walking through the darkness with no exit or searching for gold dust in a desert. The prospects of finding him seemed bleak. And then suddenly a light shined into the endless darkness.

Everyone was taking action while I was unaware of it. She felt left out, but it was only testament to her ignorance. But thanks to them, I can finally...

“...See Luca,” she muttered.

The memories of him she had suppressed came rushing back to her. He was so tall looking up at him in a ten-year-old body hurt her neck. His stunning hair and eyes seemed to mock the world with how perfect they were. The chiseled contours of his face made him look like a perfectly crafted doll. The chilly touch of his large hand wrapped around hers was still vivid.

Luca. Luca.

She squeezed her right hand to her chest—it was the same hand his large hand always grabbed and where the proof of their contract once sat. The ring

had been the sole proof she had that it was okay for her to be in their world. Her selfish complaints and arbitrary actions resulted in the loss of that ring and the gaping distance between her and Luca.

Once more she heard someone cackle—a dark twisting sound of cackling laughter echoed through the recesses of her mind.

Chapter 45

THEY promised Yuki she would see Luca in the near future. Several more days had passed since then.

Yuki's life took a complete change since their conversation over tea. Servants were dispatched from Rhadal Mende's manor in the capital to serve Yuki. They assisted her with everything from waking up in the morning to pulling down her covers and fluffing her pillows at night. When she woke, they dressed her, combed her long hair, served her breakfast in her room, and cleaned.

Instructed not to leave her room at any time, she stayed inside the spacious quarters until she was summoned to administer medicine to patients. Once she finished making her rounds through all the sickrooms in Fol Castle, she was escorted back to her room, served dinner, and ordered not to leave again. Thus every day came and went following the same pattern.

Whether it was the abundance of free time she suddenly had on her hands or the rapid deterioration in her health, Yuki found most hours of her day were spent sleeping. Energy pulsed through her during the time bustling among patients outside her quarters, but she quickly fell asleep once she was left alone in the stillness of her fancy chambers. The majority of her downtime was spent under the blankets.

Either Selena was worried about Yuki or just had a lot of spare time, because she frequently dropped by and chatted over tea with her. She often had to rouse Yuki out of sleep when she came. On more than one occasion, Yuki had fallen back to sleep on the table while they were in the middle of a conversation. Selena usually couldn't wake her again and would carry her back to bed.

A little past noon, Yuki finished administering the medicine and the sole time she was allowed outside her chambers came to an end. She returned to her bed

and flopped onto it. The rustling of clothing dragged her from the recesses of sleep that had claimed her once again.

“Oh, did I accidentally wake you?” Rhad whispered apologetically, sweetness lacing his tone.

Yuki answered him, her voice still hoarse from sleep, “It’s okay. I wasn’t trying to sleep...”

I fell asleep again. The sluggish gears in her brain moved at a snail’s speed as the abyss of sleep tickled at her consciousness, inviting her back to its tender embrace. Blinking repeatedly, she shook her head and pinched her cheek to ward off the drowsiness.

“If I sleep much more I won’t be able to sleep at night.”

A lie. As things stood, she could sleep all day and all night, but her old lifestyle and customs brought the words to her tongue faster than reality.

“You look sleepy still, Lady Yuki. I will have something brought to help you wake up and focus,” Rhad said and glanced at a servant waiting beside the door. The servant nodded, bowed, and left the room.

“...Thank you.” Yuki forced her heavy eyelids to remain open—despite her desire to be awake they wanted sleep—and offered Rhad a tired smile.

Convinced she would fall back to sleep if she stayed, she rolled down the blankets and slid out of bed. Guessing what she wanted, Rhad pulled a plush chair out from the table for her and waited like a gentleman for her to arrive.

“Thank you.” She accepted his generous offer and sat. Rhad pushed the chair in for her. She sat perfectly still on the cushion waiting for her slowly turning brain to spark back to alertness.

“Sit with me, Rhad,” she instructed as he stood at attention beside her chair. He wore a professional smile, the kind that puts a distance between a subordinate and his superior. “You could have just sat down without my permission...”

Since the day they talked in the tavern and even more since the conversation over tea, Rhad began treating her with the utmost formality and reserve. He

requested she drop all formality with him, while he himself stopped joking around and speaking casually. There was an unduly stiff and formal edge to everything he said and did around her. Constant appeals from her to stop calling her Lady, M'lady, and other formalities had no effect.

"You honor me with your invitation. I humbly accept." He bowed and sat in the seat across from her.

Like Selena, Rhad frequently stopped by Yuki's chambers to check on her. When she asked him the reason for his visits, he turned it on her and said, "Because you are far too defenseless, m'lady."

"**THE** people with you are just as guilty, but you also have absolutely no sense of the danger you are in, Lady Yuki."

"What danger...?"

"Pay attention to what I am about to tell you. Prince Orga has his sights set on you. You may be all right with your current disguise, but Maruk is also targeting you."

"But the world believes Maruk already executed me—"

"A naïve outlook. Word spreading about you being successfully executed in Maruk is the work of careful information suppression and manipulation. Someone who knows the truth unquestionably exists and went through the effort of concealing it. Furthermore, they have taken steps to eliminate people who know the truth or try to learn it. That is the person or people you are dealing with."

Yuki hung her head. She didn't possess the right words to answer him.

"You need to think more about how important you are."

"My importance?"

YUKI sneered at herself when she remembered the conversation with Rhad a few days earlier. Importance. Did she have value? Much less importance? What would make her important?

Caring for those infected with the Ten Day Fever. Not even a doctor herself, anyone who wanted to put in the effort could replace her as a doctor's assistant.

Luca's Master. As long as she died, he could obtain a new Master.

There's nothing...important about me.

As it was, Yuki didn't do much of anything aside from sleeping away the day. Before now, she had worked herself to death running around taking and giving orders to be of some use. Yet they easily removed her from the role she thought was uniquely hers and set her aside in some room like an unwanted toy.

There really isn't anything.

"I wonder what my importance is," she inadvertently blurted a rhetorical question. Rhad quizzically watched her. "I never thought about it before now. Not even when I was in Japan."

Yuki simply lived every day as it came. Contemplating the purpose of her existence wasn't even a factor for her.

"I thought I would attend university, study for four years, go job hunting, get a job, and work as a member of society like everyone else."

She would occasionally hang out with her friends, go on trips, and be satisfied as long as something fun and unique occasionally colored a normal life. Never did she stop to think about what value her life held.

The fact I didn't think about it means I had no reason to. It's only now I realize how fortunate I was.

"What are you talking about?"

"Hmm?"

Yuki forgot Rhad was sitting across from her. Worried her drowsiness was making her drift out of reality, she slapped her cheek with her right hand. Rhad's ashen eyes studied her face.

"I do not know anything about this university, Japan, or job hunting you speak of, but...do you not understand your grave importance, Lady Yuki?"

“Weren’t you listening? I have no such...thing.”

Why does he keep bringing it up? She already felt down in the dumps about her lack of value, why did he relentlessly dig it up? Yuki glared at him.

Rhad heaved a sad, audible sigh. “I have little doubt Fol would have been destroyed by the Ten Day Fever by now had you not been here.”

“You don’t have to flatter me, Rhad. I’m sure you would have done something about it.”

Knives wiggled their way into her heart. She didn’t want to say such things, but cynicism spilled from her.

Rhad smiled wistfully and continued, “Well, I would have come up with some sort of plan. But for all I could plan and scheme, I can’t save the sick.”

“I can’t do that either... The most I can do is mix the medicinal ingredients together, offer my condolences to the sick, and do the wash.”

The more she devalued herself with her words, the deeper her feelings sunk. She hadn’t paid it much thought until then, but now she thought about how little meaning and value what she worked so hard for held.

That’s not even the problem here either.

“...Lady Yuki, is it possible you do not know?”

“...Know what?” she looked at Rhad with glazed over eyes. Surprised by her expression, his right eyebrow arched.

“I see. I was under the impression they just hadn’t filled you in on the details. Now I see you don’t know anything.”

“Anything about what?” she snapped, annoyed by his roundabout comments.

Rhad stood, a grin tugging the corners of his lips. “To a certain level, it is impressive you haven’t realized it yourself yet. Please look.”

Faster than she could ask what he was doing, Rhad pulled an unsheathed dagger from his boot. Not even giving her a chance to get a word in edgewise, he sliced his left arm with the dagger.

Chapter 46

IT happened in a blink of an eye. Bright-red blood gushed from the fifteen centimeter-long slash across his left arm. The fog lingering in her brain instantly cleared. Panic mounted at the abrupt appearance of blood.

“Aah! Wh-Wh-What?! What did you just do?!” she spluttered.

“Please stay calm,” Rhad coaxed, while blood ran down his arm and dripped onto the marble floor.

“How do you expect me to stay calm?! How are you so calm?! Doesn’t it hurt?!”

“It hurts.” Rhad held his injured arm out to Yuki with a composed expression.

“What?” She couldn’t look directly at the arm spilling blood all over the mahogany table and squeamishly pleaded with him. “What? What do you want me to do?”

“For starters, will you stop the blood flow?” he said coolly.

“O-Okay!” The chair scraped across the marble as she leapt to her feet and ran over to yank the sheets off her bed. She folded a corner of the sheet several times and applied it to his arm with the right amount of pressure she learned from Vigo. “Wh-Why did you do this?”

Rhad groaned. “Lady Yuki, what do you think about when you are interacting with patients suffering from the Ten Day Fever?”

“Huh?” She took a moment to consider his question. The lodged gears in her brain creaked into jerky action. “...I pray for them to get well soon. I think?”

“Then please pray for me in the same way.”

“Why?!” she was thunderstruck by the Rhad and his Cheshire cat like smile. “Y-You’re the one who cut yourself!”

“Don’t let the small details bother you. Please think of me in the same way as

the sick. It might not show on my face, but I am in an astronomical amount of pain.”

“I-I bet...Are you okay?” Blood rapidly absorbed through the folds of the sheet she pressed against his arm, dyeing it a sticky red penetrating all the way to her fingertips.

“Please hurry if you care.”

“O-Okay...”

Urged on by him she prayed to herself, *I hope he gets well soon*. A frown crossed her face at the dark-red liquid pulsing out of the slash that caused her to cringe just seeing it. *Not like anything will change by me praying for him*.

“But I hope the blood stops soon,” she encouraged, looking up at his face. Rhad’s eyes were fixated on his left arm. She followed his gaze and dropped her eyes to the painfully red sheet. “...What is this?”

A dull white light radiated from Rhad’s left arm—or rather, from where Yuki’s hands touched the sheet against his arm. Too shocked to move, Rhad yanked the sheet from her hand and his arm. A scab suddenly formed over the fifteen-centimeter slice and started slowly healing from one corner following along the line of the cut. Before their very eyes the scab shrunk in size.



“I’m surprised. I didn’t realize it healed this quickly,” Rhad observed.

“Huuuuh?!” Ten seconds later the scab disappeared leaving fresh skin behind and zero trace of the cut. “...What was that just now?”

“Did this help you to understand, m’lady?” Yuki’s mouth fell open like a fool and her mind stopped working. “This is your power, Lady Yuki.”

“M-My...p-power?”

“So Yuki, if you happen to manifest powers, you mustn’t use them indiscriminately in front of others. Promise me you won’t.” Her father’s words nearly a year ago rung through her head.

Power. Was that the explanation for what just happened?

“Huh? Um...uuhh...wait, whaaaaat?!”

What was that just now? Uh, was that it? Hey! Tell me, Papa, was that it?! Since when? Why? How? Doubts, questions, and confusion swirled through her. As her mind raced to figure out when it started, two large hands reached out and caressed her cheeks. They forced her head up.

“Now do you understand? The importance of your existence. The gravity of who you are. You should also be aware this power of yours seems to take a toll on you physically. We can assume your poor health these past weeks is a direct result of you using your power too much. You visited all the sick today too. Please rest.”

“Mmmph,” she mumbled through her squished cheeks.

Rhad’s ashen eyes wavered. “...Were you not here, one of the few possibilities to wake Prince Luca from his slumber would disappear. Please never forget the value you have there.”

Yuki gave a shuddery nod and Rhad released her cheeks.

“Has it sunk in for you yet? Only a select number of Mages and Witches have the power to heal. If my conjecture is correct, your power is leaps and bounds beyond anything this land has seen in ages. Shall we play a what-if scenario? Say you were kidnapped. Should they take you to a battlefield, you would be squeezed of your ability until you dropped dead. The enemy side would see you

as a threat and focus their full force on eliminating you or in turn capturing you for their own side. Both scenarios end horribly for you.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“With that in mind, please do not make light of who you are and what you can do.”

“I-I won’t.”

“Sadly, your current predicament isn’t too far off from those worst-case scenarios,” Rhad muttered more to himself than Yuki.

“What do you mean?”

“Please be at ease. At present, I am protecting you.”

“You are? I’ll trust you then,” Yuki said, vaguely nodding as the budding doubts only grew. Satisfied with her answer, Rhad smiled.

My...power. I still don’t believe it. Yuki stared at her hand where minutes earlier a light cascade of color possessing no semblance to blue, green, or white had emitted. *What can I do with this power? Rhad said it’s necessary to wake Luca. Why does he need to be woken up?*

Rifaenotis told her Luca was inside a dungeon. And Rhad told her Luca was unconscious.

“Say, Rhad, where is Luca right now?”

“Prince Luca is currently resting in his own chambers. Chambers no one is allowed entry to.”

“No one can go inside his room?”

“Yes. The Queen and Prince Orga are controlling everything related to his chambers. There is no room for us to get near him. I have heard they occasionally allow someone inside to change his position.”

“Change his position...” Luca was asleep in his own room—that offered some solace to Yuki who believed he was locked in a dark, dank dungeon under the castle. They cared enough to change his position to keep bedsores from developing. That was something at least.

Something about what Rhad said bothered her though. “Hey, Rhad, you said there’s no room for you to get near him, right? I’m surprised you were able to discover he’s asleep in his room.”

“Hm? Ah, that... My creed is to use anything usable to accomplish my goals,” Rhad confessed, the corners of his lips turning up in a wicked grin.

For not knowing what his grin meant, it sure gave her gooseflesh. Warning bells sounded in her head not to press him on it. Spotting her take a step back from him, Rhad laughed aloud and patted her head.

“You don’t need to dirty yourself thinking about what I have done, Lady Yuki. Good news should be on the way—please rest and restore your energy until it comes.” Rhad walked over to a different bed than the one Yuki had pulled the sheets off, and rolled down the comforter. “You must be exhausted from my forcing you to use your ability for a trivial reason. Please get some sleep.”

Yuki shook her head, refusing his kind offer and slumped back in another chair. “No, I’m fine. Any more sleep than I’ve already gotten and I’ll forget what it’s like to be awake.”

“Is that so? In that case, I should excuse myself.”

“Okay. Thanks... Thank you for informing me...”

“No need for thanks. If you were to wish for it, your humble servant Rhadal Mende would pluck the moon and sun from the sky and present it to you.”

For a moment, Yuki was taken aback by the slick way he offered something so grand to her. She giggled when she realized he was joking.

“Ahaha. Don’t do that. I don’t need the sun or the moon.”

“Too bad. I thought it would be the perfect opportunity to put my skills on display for you too,” Rhad joked. And then his expression suddenly turned grim. Yuki blinked owlishly at the sudden change. “Very well, allow me to offer you a word of warning instead, Lady Yuki. Do not put your trust in those two.”

“What? Who—”

Before she could ask who he was referring to, he spoke over her. “They knew of your power and its price and kept it from you... Keep that in mind.”

Those words hit her like a bucket of ice.

...*Why?*

Yuki looked at the palm of her hand, stained red by Rhad's blood. The hand had grown a little larger than when she was stuck in a ten-year-old's body. Rhad bowed and left the room, leaving her to her thoughts. She heard the door quietly close. Silence consumed the room.

"They knew...?"

Thinking back, there were plenty of situations where their actions would be weird had they not known. For all they spoke about not wanting Yuki to catch the Ten Day Fever, they constantly had her interact up-close and personal with the sick. And then there was the time Yuki ran to the half-dead bandit to look at his wounds and was stopped by Vigo's harsh yelling. Then it hit her—what happened at the orphanage.

"...Chiruka."

Chiruka was her first time encountering someone afflicted with the Ten Day Fever so she wasn't aware at the time, but after traveling around Rvydom dealing with the infected she knew better—it was implausible for someone in such a critical state as being covered in pustules as she had been to make a full recovery in a short time. Most people couldn't recover at all.

"Was that...the result of my power?"

Raucous cackling started once again in the back of her mind. Pushing the fear away, she focused on Vigo and Selena.

They noticed my power? Since when? Had they made Yuki administer medicine to all the patients in Fol every day because of it?

The cackling returned even louder, gradually clawing away at the inside of her head and bringing forth a raging headache and incessant ringing. Chills froze the back of her neck and her head felt like lead. The world pitched forward.

"Do not put your trust in those two."

How can I do that? They had always looked out for her. They prioritized her above all else.

“Do not put your trust in those two.”

Rhad’s words played and replayed in her mind like a broken record.

Why didn’t they tell me? Why didn’t they say anything when they knew? Why? Why? Why? Questions with no end or answer raced through her mind—her temples throbbed.

“I! Will trust in others in order to be trusted!” she shouted amid the spinning. She no longer knew which way was left or right or where up and down were. She fought not to lose consciousness. She fought not to lose herself.

What should I do? What can I trust? Who do I even want to ask these questions?

Someone *cackled*. Shivers ran across Yuki’s body, the incessant laughter almost sounded as if someone was watching the funniest soap opera in the world from inside her head.

Chapter 47

A delicious smell came from somewhere.

The smell of steamed wheat reminiscent of the meat and bean buns Yuki bought and ate on the way home from school stimulated her nasal cavity. Her stomach suddenly remembered its hunger and began contracting.

“...Nngh.”

Yuki had fallen asleep in the chair at the bloodied table. The realization she had lost consciousness yet again frightened her. The lasting effects of extreme drowsiness weighed on her eyelids and tempted her back into the folds of sleep.

“Oh no. Did I wake you?”

Something slipped from her shoulders and coldness came with its absence. Out of her partially cracked eyes, she saw a blanket slip and wrap around the chair’s armrest.

“Good time to wake up though. I brought your food.”

“...Selena.”

Selena sat opposite of Yuki. The servants must have cleaned up Rhad’s blood because it was gone and Selena didn’t act like she knew about it. When her eyes met Yuki’s she laughed.

“Silly, Yuki. There’s a red mark on your forehead from sleeping with your face pressed against the table!” Her light-purple hair tied in a high ponytail shook with her laughter. Yuki vacantly stared at her.

...She acts like nothing happened. Yuki rubbed her forehead and smiled derisively. *No, Selena is acting as she always has.* The one who changed was Yuki. She knew what she hadn’t before.

“I brought your food. Would you rather get in bed and sleep? Or eat in bed?”

Selena asked, worriedly peering at Yuki's tensed face.

Yuki forced her lips to move into an awkward smile. "Either way ends with me in bed."

"It does. Because whether you're talking to me or eating, you still fall asleep midway. Want me to help you to bed?"

Yuki shook her head. "I'm not going to sleep. I'll eat at the table."

"If that's what you want," Selena conceded and placed the food tray on the table in front of her. She picked up a steamed roll and offered it to Yuki.

"Thanks." Yuki accepted the roll and bit into it.

Trust... Rhad's words clung to her mind like tar. I shouldn't trust her?

Selena watched her eat with an almost motherly smile. Yuki had been with her and Vigo for months now. The trip to the capital was about the only time she had been separated from them.

Why did they keep my power a secret? Why didn't they tell me? We had plenty of time alone together. Yuki looked questioningly at Selena who tilted her head in return.

"What's wrong, Yuki? Does it taste bad?"

Yuki gave her head a small shake.

What if I ask her and she tells me it was because I would be a more efficient tool by not knowing? What if once they know I've found out, they change their attitude toward me?

Things might not stay as they were should she confront them about their silence. Their attitude and kindness toward her could drastically change. If those were the options, she preferred not to know the answer. Ignorance was far more blissful when knowing might reveal they were using Yuki all along.

Why did he have to say that?

Rhad warned her about it after careful consideration of what the situation meant for Yuki. He interacted with her honestly, laying out where he stood and what he wanted from her. She should be grateful to him for telling her and not

angry because she didn't like what he had said. Rhad literally put his own flesh and blood on the line to give her undeniable proof she had powers. It wasn't that she didn't believe him. But she wanted to believe in Selena and Vigo too.

Because if I don't, everything until now will become a lie.

Yuki stuffed her mouth with the steamed roll. She tried to swallow a whole chunk without chewing and it got stuck in her throat. Tears misted her eyes as she choked it back. Selena rushed out of the room to get her a glass of water.

Everything they did for her until now had been for her valuable power.

The way they treasured and cared for her was all because they would be inconvenienced if their useful tool became unusable if she hurt herself. They yelled and got angry when she took action alone and started controlling and limiting how much she could go out. Out of concern? No, because they feared her learning she had power and value. They feared others learning of her power and using her instead.

Just as Selena came and made sure she properly ate and didn't choke to death—it was all to make sure she could still be put to use. They were going to squeeze every last bit of energy out of her until she curled up and died. Isn't that what Rhad said others would do if they found out?

If they were using her for those reasons, caring for her to use her, then....

I couldn't bear it.

Tears ran down her cheeks and salted her roll.

IS it supposed to be a happy occasion when you realize you have powers no one else does? Yuki wished she had lived out her life without ever knowing. She lay with her chest sprawled on the table and her butt firmly planted in the plush chair that had become her rotting place.

“Yuki, is it just me or are you extremely out of sorts today?”

The sound of china clattering against the table and the subtle fragrance of tea nudged at her to pry herself from the table. “You...think so?”

Selena was absolutely right. Yuki was aware of the truth of those words too—

not that she would admit it. No longer could she interact with patients the same way she had until Rhad's revelation. Were she capable of interacting with the patients the same way, it would have activated her powers in the most natural form. However, once made aware of the existence of her power, the natural way in which she interacted with the patients escaped her.

"Well, it's a given you'd be feeling flustered," Selena said, speaking of a different source than the one affecting Yuki. She stroked Yuki's hair. "You still feel under the weather, don't you? You should prioritize getting some good rest in."

Selena's long fingers ran through her hair, rousing the sleepiness in her.

"...Unfortunately, it looks like she won't have time to rest," came Rhad's voice. Yuki lifted herself from the table. Rhad knocked on the door left open for fresh air.

"Why's that?" Selena asked.

"Good news came." Something squeezed Yuki's heart. "You have been summoned to the castle, Lady Yuki."

She jumped out of her chair. A terrifyingly amused expression lit Rhad's face.

THE leaves began to change color and fall off the trees—the season had switched to fall. Yuki arrived in Aridol just as the flowers started to bloom across the land—early spring. Being separated from Luca and the others happened as the heat started setting in—the early summer. By the time she realized it, several seasons had come and gone.

With a thin shawl wrapped around her shoulders, Yuki opened the balcony door. Frigid air swept into the room. Fresh air filtered inside the room brimming with her frustration and gloom.

Sighing, she stepped out on the balcony and gazed at the sky dotted by stars. The night sky warped as she looked at it through sleepy, lazy eyes. Drowsiness incessantly beckoned Yuki. Every waking moment was marked by a strong pull to return to sleep. But she didn't want to sleep.

Someone knocked on the door to her chambers.

“Come in,” she replied without looking. The door creaked as it opened. Boots clacked against the marble behind her. Still, she kept her eyes on the stars. “Sorry for calling you to see me at this hour.”

“Nonsense. I am actually honored to have you summon me. It makes me aware of how much trust you have come to put in me, Lady Yuki,” said a clear, sweet voice.

Deeply inhaling the chilly air, she turned around, putting her back to the stars. “I have something I want to say to you.”

“...What can I do for you? The events of the morrow are already—”

She shook her head and bit the inside of her cheek. What should she say? There was much she wanted to tell him, but vexation niggled at her as the words she sought always eluded her at important times.

“...Rhad, you told me not to put my trust in Selena and Vigo,” she started, piecing her thoughts together as she spoke. “I’ve thought about a lot of things since you said that. What do they actually want to do? What do they want to make me do?”

Yuki’s heart pounded in her ears. An icy breeze whisked passed her as though it were trying to drown out the sound.

“I really did think about it from different angles... Are they actually only using me as a nifty little tool like you said? Even if they are, I can’t say I’m much different when I used them as a method of safe travel from Rvydom to Adolunde.” The wind whipped up her hair and wove its way through her locks and brushed by her ear.

“Rhad, you told me not to put my trust in the two of them, correct?” she repeated, searching for his confirmation.

“I did,” he replied, standing in the balcony doorway.

“I know you said as such out of concern for my well-being. But I can’t do it. Even if they are just using me, I care for them. I want things to remain as they have been forever.”

“...You have an eccentric sense of loyalty and trust.”

Disdain seeped through his smile, but she pretended not to notice. “I’m a master of baseless trust after all.”

“Do you believe the world is devoid of bad people?”

“I don’t,” she answered with a smile. “Papa—my father used to say humans possess good and evil inside them. Just that the scale weighs more heavily on one side for everyone.”

When did Kaito share his advice with Yuki?

Papa said those words when I tried to quit archery.

Participating in tournaments meant standing in the public’s eye. A child whose appearance hadn’t changed for years taking part in tournaments was a source of fear for those who didn’t know better. Cruelty from heartless people eventually wore Yuki down and made her want to quit. They disparaged her as not being human and cursed at her to get out of the limelight. She endured the curses, the bullying, and the poor treatment until their malice escalated to the point of hindering the tournament itself.

“Despite everything they have done, Yuki, you mustn’t hate those people,” Kaito instructed, hugging his crying daughter whose archery bag had been torn to shreds.

“...It is frighteningly simple to hate someone. But nothing good will come of such hatred. So I will remain liking those two. Even if they have ill intentions towards me, I will believe in their good,” she proclaimed. Getting it off her chest was refreshing. “Anyway, even if they are using me, they only did so to help patients infected with the Ten Day Fever. Besides, had I known about my power sooner, I would’ve still wanted to use it for the sick.”

That’s right. Why did I worry so much over this?

Rhad took her challenge with an embittered expression. “Can you still say that when doing so is eating away at your life?”

“Excuse me?”

“The more you use your power the greater the drain on you. You are

exhausting your stamina and your lifeforce... Are you still willing to save people you don't know at the cost of your life?"

His question had a familiar ring to it.

"Die for your country and your people."

Those cruel words somehow warmed her heart. Pasch loved his people and country so much he thought the guilt and price of sacrificing one person could save them from war. Yuki wondered what he was doing now. She smiled to herself. Things were different now. She had interacted with the people of this world. Their warmth and kindness were things she knew.

"If using this power brings happiness to the people of this world, I'll happily make use of it. I'd be satisfied even if it results in my death."

Because I have nothing outside of this power.

Yuki had neither friend nor family in this world who would mourn her death. The people on Earth wouldn't even know if she died. As it was, they might have already written her off as dead.

"If I came to this land for such a reason—should it be my fate—I'll happily accept it."

Because I feel an anomaly like myself will finally be accepted somewhere by doing so.

"...You told me because it's killing me. Thank you." Moved by his kindness, her cheeks softened into a smile. "Should I die, be sure to let Selena and Vigo meet Luca. This is a must. Promise me?"

Rhad's face contorted as a deeper bitterness filled him. Staring at her like she was an unbelievable fool, he spat, "I will not allow you to die until you wake Prince Luca."

"Then you'd better hurry up and make it possible for me to go where Luca is sleeping," she grinned and turned on her heel, dismissing him. Once again, she turned her eyes to the stars not unlike the ones seen from Earth.

For the longest time she had searched for the reason she was sent to this world.

To save those afflicted with the Ten Day Fever and...rescue Luca.

Would rescuing Luca lead to him cooperating with Rvydom and putting an end to the wars plaguing Aridol?

If that's the reason why I'm in this world, then—

Chapter 48

YUKI gazed at the familiar imposing building. Not too long ago the gatekeeper there had treated her rudely. And the days she once spent inside its sprawling parlors and glamorous rooms felt like ages past.

“...At long last...” she muttered, staring emotionally at the castle.

Five days had passed since Rhad received the good news. Word had come saying the Queen of Adolunde might have contracted an illness in line with the Ten Day Fever.

“The castle has royal doctors, but they do not have special medicine explicitly for the Ten Day Fever. You can bet they want to get a hold of anything rumored to work. At any rate, this is our ticket inside,” Rhad said.

Just yesterday Yuki and the others arrived in the capital. They spent the night at Rhad’s manor. Summons came for Yuki as pustules and a rash had erupted on the queen’s skin. The royal doctors had given up hope.

Selena and Vigo were on standby at Rhad’s manor because of their renown as Rvydom soldiers. Medicine from Vigo was secured in the bag Yuki gripped in her left hand.

“Shall we go?”

Yuki peered up at Rhad standing beside her. Her thoughts returned to when she stood side by side with Luca. Though she stood in the same spot, her position in this world had changed. No large hand wearing a matching ring held hers. No ring sat on her right hand’s middle finger. The fear-inspiring castle gates swung open before her, letting her back inside the place everything began.

AN uncountable number of eyes followed Rhad and Yuki. Discomforted by the unduly impolite stares, Yuki stole a peek at Rhad and found him calmly walking

with his eyes trained forward. How long had they walked through the castle? The plush rug squishing underfoot removed the strain on her feet and her nerves further dulled her sense of time.

Ascending stairs, descending stairs, Rhad strode on in silence and she walked with broad strides to keep pace with him. The big steps she took quickly drained her of what little energy she had. By the time her heavy breathing shuddered her shoulders, Rhad halted.

“The audience chamber is just ahead. As his and her Majesty are both bedridden, the audience will be with Prince Orga.... Whatever he may say, please do not let it rile you. Do not take his bait.”

Orga...

Pain seared through her chest as if a creature were trying to claw its way out from the inside. Closing her eyes, she took several steadying breaths to overcome the familiar yet unceasing ache.

“...I’ll be okay,” she rasped.

“I will do all the talking. Please keep your head down and your mouth shut, Lady Yuki.”

“Okay.”

Yuki recalled the conversation she exchanged with Rhad before coming to the castle.

“I need you to understand the situation, Lady Yuki. The *queen* has contracted the Ten Day Fever. Meaning not only the capital, but Adolunde’s royal castle has been infiltrated by such a severe case of the Ten Day Fever to where it has reached the most protected, cloistered members of the royal family. Do understand what that means?”

“I guess I do...?” she answered, unsure.

“Uncertainty is written all over your face. Listen to me very closely. Let me give it to you straight: it means the chances of Prince Luca being infected with the Ten Day Fever have skyrocketed.”

“...They have?!”

“Why do you have such difficulty realizing these basic things, m’lady? The future is bleak.” Rhad ran his hand over his face.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Let me lay things out for you nice and clear. Our primary objective is to see Prince Luca. You can heal all things related to the Ten Day Fever, Lady Yuki. Understand?”

“Are you implying we want Luca to be infected with the Ten Day Fever?!”

“Now you’ve got it. You will use your power to heal the queen, Lady Yuki. Not long after, Prince Luca will become infected with the Ten Day Fever as well. How do you believe they will react when he is contagious?”

“They will summon for me again...”

“Exactly. I will do my best to finagle a way for us to get an audience with him sooner, but please consider this as the most effective method we have.”

But the probability of it working is slim.

There was no guarantee Luca would contract the Ten Day Fever just by residing inside the infected palace. Although his health was deteriorating from the curse he was under, Luca was Yuki’s Knight and a Violet Knight at that. Knights were tougher than normal people, as seen by how Selena could work with the sick and never even caught a cough.

But their plan hinged on the chance of him catching the Ten Day Fever. Yuki grabbed at the cloth covering her heart. What if she couldn’t save the queen? What if Luca didn’t catch the Ten Day Fever? Or if he contracted it and she couldn’t save him? Unnerved and worry ridden by those what-ifs, the blood drained from her face and her fingers went cold. Her hands shook uncontrollably. The hammering of her heart rippled through her chest.

I can’t get stuck on the ifs.

“Everything starts from here after all.”

Yuki’s words were erased by the heavy double-doors opening.

THE daunting doors slowly opened as they dragged along the crimson rug. Out of the corner of her eye, Yuki spotted the feet of two guards putting their full body's weight into pushing the doors open.

"Enter," commanded a powerful voice once the doors were fully open. Yuki cringed at the sound of that voice and her heart all but stopped beating. An electric shock surged through her chest. Her mind screamed at her to flee and her legs rooted her to the ground. Images of the horrible things the voice's owner had done to her brought bile to the back of her throat.

"Lady Yuki. We must go," Rhad whispered. Through much effort, she gave a small nod in return. Brow knitted firmly together as she endured the pulsing pain radiating through her, she couldn't lift her head in accordance with court decorum.

"Lady Yuki," he urged.

Yuki thought only of putting one foot in front of the other and looking at Rhad's feet on the rug to advance forward. They walked a fair distance along the crimson rug until Rhad stopped in the middle of the large audience chamber and went down on one knee with his head lowered.

Mimicking Rhad's posture, Yuki went down on both knees, but the intensifying surges of pain had her hands hit the floor before her knee. She kept her eyes trained on the six inch thick rug. Cold sweat beaded her temples. A drip of sweat slipped from the tip of her nose onto the rug. She couldn't see, but knew instinctively Rhad had lifted his head.

"I am Rhadal Mende, here upon your summons. As requested, I have brought you the girl with the power to heal," Rhad's sonorous voice echoed.

An impassionate voice responded back, "I've heard the stories."

"Yes, sire." Rhad lowered his head.

"I'll have my men search the medicine you've brought for anything hazardous. I'm sure you don't mind."

"Of course not."

"Also, I have no doubt you're already aware of this, but if you act in any way

we take as a threat on Mother, your life is forfeit.”

“We wouldn’t think of it.”

“...We’ll see.”

The conversation flowed smoothly like a typical greeting. Rather than a discussion, it sounded more like an inquest. Keeping her head down, Yuki’s face contorted with intense pain.

“Now that I think about it, I would like to see the girl’s face. She may become the heroine who saves Mother’s life.”

“As you command.”

A cold silence bounced off the towering walls of the audience chamber. Eyes burrowed into Yuki’s back. Sweat trickled down her spine, springing up gooseflesh across her arms and legs.

“Lady Yuki,” Rhad whispered. However, Yuki lacked the composure to hear him. Agonizing pain tightened around her chest and her hands trembled relentlessly on the rug.

Stop. Stop. Was she telling the pain in her chest to stop or the shaking? Biting her lip hard enough for a metallic flavor to fill her mouth, she grimaced and battled the pain. *It’s okay. I’ll be okay.*

She sucked in as much air as her lungs could take in a single breath. Shutting her eyes, she felt the air fill her. Exhaling deeply, she slowly lifted her head. The shaking stopped.

Sitting on his throne, Orga didn’t look much different from the last time she saw him. Crow black hair and jet-black eyes. Crossed legs. His cheek settled against his hand propped on the armrest. He exuded an aura of refinement that matched the breathtaking grand audience chamber.

“Heh, you’re the one?” One corner of his lips curled up in a demeaning sneer as his eyes sliced through her very being. The pain quadrupled.

I knew it. I can’t do it!

Yuki dropped her gaze and lowered her head. Tears dripped to the floor the instant her head turned down. The droplets hit her hands. Rhad warned her in

advance, but seething rage quickly overtook her.

I'll say something I shouldn't.

Instinctively her hand reached up and covered her mouth. She forcefully covered her mouth to stop from saying anything stupid. Blocking her mouth hindered her breathing, stinging her eyes with more tears.

Why are you starting wars?

How can you sit on that throne without a care in the world?

Why are you only trying to save your mother?

Murderer. You mercilessly, brutally killed that boy's mother in the forest. Monster. Abomination. Psycho. Heartless. Unjust. Why? Why? You psychopath. Psychopath. Insane man. Crazy! Crazy! Crazy!

Those black eyes laced with hatred forcefully pulled out the loathing Yuki had kept in check. A guttural groan lodged itself in the back of her throat as the words stuck there. Resentment too great to put into words turned into red-hot tears.

Did the seal burned into her chest hurt? Or was her heart mentally recoiling? The tears overflowed as she sealed her mouth from uttering the curses she had in store for the monster on his throne.

"Forgive me!" A hand shot out from the side and pulled Yuki close, knocking her into Rhad's chest. He pulled her face against him and wrapped his arms around her back to hide her. "You have my sincerest apology for this most inappropriate display. The truth is someone raped her last night and she has had troubled meeting the eyes of men ever since."

"...I haven't received word of such an incident taking place."

"No, sire. I did not wish to burden your heart further with this matter when you are already unsettled by what has happened to the queen.... Furthermore, it is with great humiliation the rape occurred within my Mende household. Not wishing it to explode into a major issue, I forbade anyone from speaking of the incident."

"I see. Someone unhappy with Mother must have laid their hands on her.

Very well, to compensate her for the mental anguish, I will have a room prepared inside this castle. You are welcome to spend the remainder of your stay in the capital here. You needn't fear assault like the one you had at the Mende House here."

"...You humble us with your limitless generosity," Rhad ingratiated, all the while holding Yuki against his chest. The conversation turned to the room they would grant Rhad as well and the time Yuki was to care for the queen before it ended.

"Please excuse us now," Rhad said, wrapping his right arm around Yuki's waist, helping her to stand while she still clamped her hands over her mouth. The tears had stopped, but her body trembled.

Rhad took several steps considerately matching Yuki's pace when Orga called them to a halt. "One more thing. I have something I wish to ask of the girl."

Unable to resist Rhad's arm on her, she was forced to face Orga once more. Eyes lowered, she focused on the gorgeous designs inlaid in the steps leading to the throne platform.

"Can the girl...lift a Witch's curse?"

"Curses?" Rhad asked, looking down at Yuki.

I've never tried.

Feebly, she shook her head like a broken doll. Crying left her head feeling dreadfully heavy and like a monkey was clapping a cymbal on top of her left temple. The gears in her brain refused to move, leaving her staring off into space.

"...I see," Orga replied curtly.

Rhad lowered his head once more and walked away supporting Yuki at his side. The large doors of the audience chamber closing behind them boomed loudly through the long hallway.

Chapter 49

ON standby at Rhad's house—the Mende Family Manor—Selena sipped her tea and eyed Vigo as he jotted information down.

“...Vigo?”

“What?”

“Hasn't Yuki seemed a little strange lately?”

The hand running the feather brush across the paper stopped. Vigo looked up from the paper at Selena. His face seemed to ask what it was she was trying to say.

“Vigo, don't tell me you haven't noticed how openly strange Yuki has been acting?! There's a limit to how oblivious you can be!”

Recently, Yuki had been acting out of character. The severity of her health played a part in her behavior, but there was something more to it that had her giving Selena the cold shoulder.

“...I'm telling you, something isn't right. It's almost like she's hiding something.”

Selena contemplated whether she had done something to offend Yuki, but nothing came to mind. If she had to dig for something, her distrust of Rhad could have been a factor. Perhaps not trusting Rhad put Yuki in a difficult position and was the source of her odd behavior.

“It's probably bad to say this when we're borrowing a room in his manor, but he seems like a big fat phony. Especially his attitude toward Yuki. What's with all that Lady Yuki and bowing junk? I don't like him.”

“That's just a symptom of your desire to monopolize the people you care about.... In any case, I believe her change is due to becoming aware of her ability.”

Selena dropped her teacup and swiftly caught it with her left hand before it smashed on the floor. Some of the tea spilled over the side and splattered on her boot. She rubbed it off with a napkin. She had a hunch of where the information slipped from.

“That *man* noticed her power. It’s my assumption he told her.”

Since they started confining Yuki to her room, Selena witnessed her worsening health improve whenever she rested. And then, out of nowhere, her health began a steady decline with no improvement.

“Around the same time her health got worse she became aloof with us...”

“And from there not only did the number of patients increase dramatically, but they began healing at a much faster rate as well,” Vigo added.

“What? I didn’t hear anything about that!”

“I would say that’s the reason for the little lady’s rapidly deteriorating health and lack of recovery,” Vigo speculated, placing his feather brush down and wiping the ink from his fingers.

“...I’m of the opinion it’s unwise to let Yuki use her powers any more than we already have.”

“I agree. I plan to make the queen her last patient.”

“...Are you all right with that, Vigo?”

Allowing Yuki to stop healing at the queen meant letting the other patients die when they could be saved. Doing so involved overlooking people they could rescue with Yuki’s power.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not so blind as to attempt saving every human in the world.”

“Yuki seems gullible enough to try.”

“She does,” Vigo laughed tiredly. He stroked his thick beard and exhaled. “... But her exhaustion and deterioration is far worse than Lord Cahn’s ever was.”

“Because she’s still young?”

“No. Lord Cahn was nowhere near as drained at the same age.”

“I see.”

Yuki learned about the existence of her power. Selena had no doubt Rhad was involved. What was Yuki thinking now that she knew?

“Hey, Vigo, what have you been writing?” Selena asked as Vigo picked up the brush and jotted various things down on the tawny paper.

“...I want to learn what kind of power the little lady possesses.”

Peering over at the notes he was making, she saw the names of successive generations of Rvydom’s kings, their powers, and how they related to each other. He must have started keeping notes for quite some time, because there was a massive pile of paper sitting on his desk. Then she remembered how Vigo’s memory was on par with Rifaenotis and he had a strong spirit of inquiry.

“What is this?” she asked.

“My attempt at writing about all the kings I can remember. In the history of our kings, not one has had a power that eats away at their lifespan. Yet the rate our little lady is wasting away can only mean it’s killing her.”

How many generations of kings had he written out? Just looking at the pages of text gave Selena a headache. His ability to memorize things to such a detail was astounding.

“She would have died a long time ago if she were handing away her own lifeforce to heal people. Then that leads us to the theory she manipulates the time inside our bodies and resets the clock to before the illness or wounds happened. But this theory fails when it comes to diseases that existed from birth. This leads me to believe she is amplifying the natural ability all humans have to recover. If that’s true, then her ability is similar to Lord Cahn’s.”

“That’s a longshot.”

“Can you come up with a better theory? The people of Rvydom who possess the ability to heal can only forcefully seal an external wound back together like glue. Internal wounds, external wounds, diseases—they’re all the same to the little lady’s power.”

“When you put it that way, it sounds just like Lord Cahn.”

“But the drain and consumption rate of hers is mindboggling.” Vigo brooded over the problem. Selena joined him in pondering the cause.

What was the difference between Cahn and Yuki? The difference in their experience? The difference in age?

“...What about the notion a Witch is restraining her power?” Selena offered.

Vigo blinked. “It’s plausible,” he muttered and added a note to his paper. He turned away from her and focused on the blank space on the page, running his feather brush along it as he stroked his beard.

He’s kind.

The man who stated he didn’t mind if Yuki died because of them using her power to heal people was the same man who was deeply troubled by what effect her power had and what side effects came from it.

I wonder how much he will suffer if Yuki is permanently damaged by what we’ve made her do. Almost certainly Vigo would blame himself for mistakenly believing Yuki’s powers fell under the same rules as Cahn’s. Regret would plague him for the rest of his days. What a foolish man. And I am an irredeemably foolish woman for letting my heart go wild for him.

Selena’s self-mocking laughter was hidden by the sound of frantic footsteps running outside the room. The door was thrown open and Rhad came inside to announce heart-stopping news that erased all laughter.

“Lady Yuki collapsed. She is presently asleep inside the room granted to her inside the castle. I request you examine her.”

YUKI heard the crackle of something burning and searing away. She heard the rumbling roar of something washing away. Unsettling, throbbing screams came from her heart. Indescribable anxiety coiled around the pit of her stomach. Covering her ears to the raucous noises drowning out her thoughts didn’t mute them as they echoed directly inside her head. She cowered from the quickly approaching sounds.

“...!”

A thundering roar like the sound of blood spurting from a stabbed body, like thunder, like an earthquake assaulted her five senses. Her throat contracted. She couldn't breathe. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind she calmly assessed she was screaming at the top of her lungs but her own voice no longer reached her ears.

"Yuki!"

Rough smacks to her cheeks slowly summoned back her senses. The stinging ache in her cheek, the ragged breaths ripping through her lungs, and the sweat soaking her heavy body.

"...Selena?" she croaked. Selena peered down at her on the verge of tears.

"Are you okay? You were badly moaning," Selena said with a kind smile and ran her thumb under Yuki's eye. Her thumb pulled away with tears on it.

They had to be in the room prepared for her in the castle. Yuki laid on the most comfortable bed she had ever felt and Selena sat beside her. Vigo stood on the other side of the bed.

"Ah..."

Vigo wordlessly put his hand on her forehead. "Do you have a headache or the urge to throw up?"

"No." A sharp pain stabbed at her chest, but the source of it wasn't visible anymore.

"This is a case of overexertion and mental exhaustion," Vigo diagnosed.

Mental exhaustion—those two words twisted her gut.

"Anxiety, rushing, worry, and other such emotions are likely causing an imbalance in you. Did all your worries and fears hit you at once?" he asked, pushing back her hair.

"...!"

Neither of them knew. They didn't know what happened between Yuki and Orga. If she were to tell them, where should she start? Stab. Stab. Daggers seemed to stab her chest from all directions.

The incident had taken place months ago, but the events clung to her memories like mold and wouldn't go away. The cruel curl of his lips as he pressed the burning hot iron rod to her chest over and over again. The smell of flesh burning away, layer by layer. Hearing her own screams come out sounding like the death screech of a banshee.

The discomfort of intense pressure being placed on her stomach had her wriggling in bed. Gradually rising bile brought a grimace to her.

"...They have finished inspecting the medicine. Can you do this, Lady Yuki?" Rhad asked from where he leaned against the wall with his arms folded.

"You want to bring Yuki to the queen in this awful state?!" Selena pulled Yuki into her arms and hugged her protectively. Without her armor on, she smelled like flowers and honey.

"We are out of time. The queen's condition is worsening by the minute."

"I don't care! If we have her do it now, she'll—"

"I'm...okay," Yuki said over Selena.

"Yuki!"

"I'm fine, Selena. I'm fine." She clenched Selena's shirt and smiled up at her. She didn't let Selena's hurt look affect her as she turned to address Rhad, "Do we go now?"

"No. It seems the queen has a guest in her quarters. You have a little time. Would you like to rest?"

"No. If I still have time, I want to use it to take a bath. I reek of sweat," she joked, putting up her best smile.

"As you wish, m'lady," Rhad said and gave orders to a servant waiting in the back of the room. The servant bowed and left.

"Yuki..." Selena intoned sadly.

"Thank you for worrying about me, both of you. But I really am okay," Yuki affirmed and swung her feet over the side of the bed. Slowly, she lowered them to the floor to fight off another wave of dizziness.

Despite what she said, her hips mocked her. If she didn't concentrate, her legs would give out and she would crumble to the ground.

I wonder if I really am going to die.

Yuki felt as if her limbs were made of sandbags. The dryness in her throat was tormenting, but her stomach refused to accept anything. The tip of her nose, her temples, and the back of her neck dripped with sweat. Inside and out, she was freezing and shivered like her life depended on it to keep from contracting hypothermia. If her body had a limit, the needle on the gauge had already passed red and broken off completely.

"If using this power brings happiness to the people of this world, I'll happily make use of it. I'd be satisfied even if it results in my death."

The statement she made to Rhad mockingly rung through her. Even on the precipice of it becoming a reality, calmness settled over her.

Blurriness filled her vision. She blinked several times. The servant returned with something in their hand. Rhad exchanged a few words with them and looked at Yuki. A door to an adjoining room was opened and the servant slipped inside. Rhad gestured for Yuki to follow. Encouraging her shaky feet to walk in a straight line, she went inside the newly opened room.

Something in the dark recesses of her mind cackled.

Chapter 50

YUKI staggered her way to the bathing chamber. Servants undressed her and eased her into a grand tub. Sinking down into the boiling hot water, the scorching temperature was just perfect for the chills racking her body. Heat relaxed her hardened veins and blood began to circulate through her body once more, warming her chilled fingertips.

The servants prepared a fresh gown of aqua-blue silk for her to don. By the time they dressed her and decorated her hair, her chills subsided and she felt significantly calmer. An eerie calm settled over her raging emotions like the eye of a storm.

Selena's fierce scowl softened into a smile when Yuki returned to her room. "Yuki, your complexion looks much better now." She knelt at Yuki's feet and brushed her knuckle along her cheek.

"Does it? I sure hope so."

Vigo brought a wooden bowl over to Yuki and put it in her hands. "Drink this. It won't do much more than bring you temporary relief, but it's something at least."

"...Thank you."

She drank the curiously sweet smelling bluish-green liquid. Shock throttled her senses at the disgusting, acrid flavor, but she managed to down the whole bowl. The nasty aftertaste brought tears to her eyes. Vigo patted her on the back to help her choke down the desire to throw it up.

"...Lady Yuki."

"I know. I'm coming now." Selena looked up at Yuki's face from where she knelt and reached her hand out to stop her from going. "Selena."

Yuki had been thinking about this for a very long time. Every time she contemplated her choice she worried and anguished over what she needed to

do next.

“Vigo, I want to say this to you as well.” Yuki looked at both of them. “Thank you very much for looking after me ever since Rifaenotis’ cabin.” She couldn’t bow to them. The weight and motion of leaning forward would topple her over; she barely had the energy to stand up straight. “I hope my power was of some use to you.”

Selena gasped. “Yuki, since when did—”

“Just recently. Rhad told me.... I don’t know what kept you both with me. I guess Rifaenotis’ request played a role in it. Still, thank you for listening to my selfish requests and for treating me well. I love you both like you’re my surrogate parents. I’m so happy to have been able to spend my last days with you.” Yuki grabbed hold of Selena’s hand where it hung grasping thin air.

“Wh-What are you talking about, Yuki? We...plan on being with you from now on too, you know? We have a lot we still need to discuss with Prince Lucat as well...” Selena’s warm hand squeezed Yuki’s hand, sharing a fraction of her warmth. “You make it...sound like this is goodbye. I don’t like that.”

What a relief for Yuki that they caught on. A sad smile touched her lips with the hope everything she felt would get through to them.

“Yuki!”

“...Little lady.” Yuki turned around and saw Vigo standing there with a pain-ridden expression. “...I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I don’t have a single regret.” Their eyes met. Regret and repentance filled his gaze. She desperately wanted to reassure him.

“Vigo, had I known this was going to happen sooner, I believe I would have done the same thing. Please don’t blame yourself.” Yuki let go of Selena’s hand and walked over to take Vigo’s hand. “Once I wake up Luca, I’ll be sure to ask him to listen to what the people of Rvydom have to say. I’ll absolutely create an opportunity for you and Selena to talk with him.” She looked at Rhad at the back of the room. Selena and Vigo followed her gaze.

Rhad bowed respectfully. “You have my word it will be done, m’lady.”

“Okay then, my dear Selena and Vigo, I must be on my way.”

“Wait, Yuki!” Selena reached out for Yuki, but Rhad stepped between them and knocked her hand away. A servant took Yuki’s hand and escorted her from the room.

“...Please refrain from causing her any further hesitation.”

“Screw off! This is—” The door shut. “This is...too much!” Selena’s sorrowful yell brought a wave of dizziness to Yuki.

RHAD escorted her by the hand. Yuki walked slowly, leaning against him. Dizziness consumed her mind and her eyes failed to see much through the blurry, partially closed line of sight. She had to put one foot in front of the other without stopping, because the moment she stopped her legs would buckle and there was a chance they wouldn’t work again.

“...I have pinned down which room belongs to Prince Luca. He rests in the top floor of the inner castle tower.... I have also made preparations to allow you access.”

“...I see.”

“Servants change Prince Luca’s sleep position every day at the exact same time, but I have bribed the servants who work the nightshift. It was quite the feat to do so. They have a tight guard on him,” Rhad grumbled. Yuki no longer had the strength to even offer him a word of thanks.

I’m amazed I could speak so much earlier.

Now it took her full concentration to put her right foot in front of her left foot. Thinking about something other than walking was a critical mistake. Her right knee buckled and she pitched forward. Rhad’s arm shot out and caught her as if he were expecting this to happen. He swept her into his arms and carried her like a bride over a threshold.

“Carrying you this way will allow us to get there faster.... Please pardon my rudeness,” he said, his breath tickling her ear.

Rhad is carrying me like a princess...

“You don’t even have the energy to reply?” Rhad had guessed correctly, so she didn’t merit his question with a response. He continued in a tight voice, “... There is a reason why the servants and guards are tense. Prince Luca has contracted the Ten Day Fever...at the exact same time the queen did.”

Yuki’s heart lurched. Soothing her heart to stop from squeezing like a vise in her chest, she ordered Rhad to continue with her eyes.

“It is uncertain whether he caught it from the servants who flipped him over or if he contracted it from unnatural means. The news hasn’t been made public because they want him to die of the Ten Day Fever.” Anger laced his tone. Further proof of his fury came from his fingers digging into her legs.

“They bring in the best doctors for the queen and leave Prince Luca to die like a dog. They changed the servants attending to him every day and the ones who had contact with him disappear from the face of the planet. Despicable.”

Yuki strongly agreed. Just what did this country—what did Orga want to do to Luca?

“...Rhad,” she rasped.

“What is it, m’lady?”

“I will...heal Luca no matter what,” she said, mustering all her strength to form the words and have them make sound.

“...Thank you.”

The rest of the way was marked by silence. Yuki shut her eyes and let Rhad carry her. Strength evaporated from her limbs—she lay limp against his chest, swaying with the motion of his gait. She drifted into a brief sleep and opened her eyes when Rhad stopped.

“We have been awaiting your arrival.”

“I have brought the girl blessed with the power to heal.” Rhad bent down and lowered his arms.

It took Yuki a second to realize he was letting her down. She slowly touched her feet to the ground. Rhad helped her stand and put her back against his chest to support her from falling.

“Here is the medicine we examined and boiling water. The queen is awake. We shall accompany you through the process. You have no qualms with that, correct?”

“Yeah, we don’t mind.”

“Very well. Your Majesty, we are coming in.”

The two royal doctors opened the grand doors to the queen’s chambers. The room was spacious enough to fit a whole classroom inside. A canopy bed larger than Yuki’s bedroom in Japan took up the center of the room. Yuki walked inside with Rhad’s arm around her shoulders for support. She trampled his feet more than once, but he said nothing. She furled back the canopy curtain and proceeded deeper inside.

...Awful.

Rhad’s hand flinched on her shoulder—he was abhorred by the state he saw the queen in too.

“...I am honored to make your acquaintance for the first time, your Majesty,” Yuki said, addressing the bedridden woman.

“.....”

The pocks and hives should have only erupted yesterday...

Pus filled hives covered the queen from head to toe, rendering it impossible to even imagine what she once looked like. Pustules grew on top of pustules, generating large, oozing sores.

“Please pardon me. I need to touch you.”

Yuki lifted the queen’s left hand. Pustules had popped and began festering on the hand reddened by blood and yellowed by pus. Shock snapped her awake and kicked her adrenaline into action, replenishing her energy for the moment. New hives formed, erupted, leaked pus, festered, and were replaced by another set of hives on the queen’s left hand at an unbelievable speed.

“What the heck?” Yuki gasped.

“...The queen’s Ten Day Fever has progressed at a rate ten times faster than common.”

Yuki couldn't believe her ears. *Ten times faster than normal? Is that even possible?*

A small moan escaped the queen's split, swollen lips. The moan was so quiet and helpless it seemed to coincide with her quickly fading life force. She was on the verge of taking her last breath.

"Rhad, I don't need the medicine," Yuki said, looking over her shoulder at Rhad preparing the medicine on the end table. She glanced at the doctors. Rhad accurately guessed what her signal meant and his eyes wavered for but a second.

"I'm sorry, but she is in the middle of the medical examination. I have to ask you to leave the canopy with me for the time being."

"We can't! We must stay beside the queen—"

"Our presence here distracts her from using her power." Rhad put his hands on the doctors' backs and pushed them outside the canopy. He looked over his shoulder and smiled at Yuki. Grateful, she smiled back and gave a firm nod. The nod was enough to summon another surge of dizziness.

Yuki was running out of time.

She returned her attention to the queen. She wanted to turn her face away from the grotesque skin infested by rapidly exploding pustules.

"...I will heal you now."

The queen moaned again. The wisp of a sound was fainter than the first time. Yuki shut her eyes and took a deep breath. Slowly, she reopened them. The white spots dotting her vision cleared. She took the swollen, pock covered, almost inhuman hand in hers and squeezed. Pus seeped out of the hives. She knelt beside the bed and brought the hand to her forehead.

"...I will absolutely heal you," she muttered in prayer and closed her eyes. Behind her shut eyelids she felt light emitting from her hand. The warm, soothing light slowly spread from her.

The incessant cackling she had been hearing abruptly ceased. "What a foolish child."

Chapter 51

SOMEONE called Yuki's name and shook her shoulders. Exhausted to the bone, she yearned for more sleep. Freezing, lethargic, and desperate for sleep she tugged away from whoever was trying to force her back to the waking world.

"Nngh..." Her eyes flicked open with a desire to curse at whoever wouldn't let her sleep. Rhad's face was right next to hers. "...?!"

"Thank goodness," Rhad sighed with relief when she scooted away from him.

Yuki blinked twice trying to figure out what happened. Rhad held her shoulders to keep her sitting upright. Memories of healing the queen and instantly losing consciousness came back to her.

"That's right, the queen..." She reached for the bedside to pull herself up, when a familiar hand wrapped around her waist and helped her. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

The queen was fast asleep in bed. The two doctors stared at the queen from the foot of the bed.

"Did it...work?"

Yuki took two steps toward the queen and peered at her face. Cautiously, she rubbed her cheek. Just like the time with Chiruka, the reddish-brown scabs peeled off, revealing smooth skin beneath.

Thank goodness... She sighed. The queen's breathing stabilized as her abdomen moved systematically.

"She is fine now."

"What in the blue blazes did you—" The doctors stared at Yuki in fear and awe. Their gaze was a mirror image of the ones she received from the people who eventually treated her like a monster.

“Rhad.” With one hand still on the bed to support her weight, she held out her other hand to him. Getting her message, Rhad took her hand and picked her up.

“The medical treatment has finished. I apologize, but her health is not in the best condition. We must leave now.”

“I-If you say so...”

Knowing she didn’t have to support her weight any longer, the energy drained from her and she collapsed against Rhad’s chest. A servant opened the door for them.

“...Good job,” Rhad said quietly to her once the doors shut behind them.

“The job isn’t finished yet. Luca comes next. Please—hurry.”

Speaking took every last bit of energy she could muster. The pressure crushing down on her chilled and weary body threatened to send her consciousness into the folds of darkness.

“Please...hurry.”

It didn’t take a doctor for her to know the next time she lost consciousness she would never wake again. She was freezing. Feeling had left her frozen fingertips and toes. Dryness zapped her mouth of saliva and her breathing came out in shallow wheezes.

“Please,” she said hoarsely. The utterance came out as more of a moan.

“...! Prepare to bounce around.”

Rhad ran down the hallway. Without the energy to hold her head up, it bounced against his chest. Ten seconds after he took off running he abruptly skidded to a stop.

“This must be a bloody joke!” shouted an enraged, familiar voice stepping out from a pool of shadows clinging to the wall as if they were a simple door.

Yuki summoned the energy to turn her head and wrenched her eyes open. In the center of the hallway stood—the Rose Witch.

“...Vivi?”

“Is she someone you know, Lady Yuki?”

“I am asking what the hell did you *DO*?!”

“...What did I do?”

“*You* healed that wretched woman’s Ten Day Fever. You seriously need to stop ruining other people’s fun. I was having the time of my life watching that bitch die a slow agonizing death too.”

“What did you do to the queen—”

“Keep quiet, would you?” Vivi snapped her fingers. Rhad froze in place. “Hey, Yuki? Do you understand what you have *done*?”

Yuki nodded firmly. Vivi dragged out an exaggerated sigh. “...I take my eyes off you for a short while and you go and forget your goals?”

“I haven’t forgotten! I’m going to Luca right now,” she shouted, rousing another round of dizziness. The hall swayed. She couldn’t glare at Vivi in defiance when her eyes wouldn’t focus.

“...Heh? Your power manifested? Maybe it got confused by your current appearance. Stupid power. It looks like it doesn’t suit your body. Of course it wouldn’t. Your actual body has always been a scarred little girl,” Vivi cackled.

“...Please...put Rhad back to normal.” Speaking to Vivi took too much energy.

“You kept using your power despite it not reacting well with you? What a foolish girl letting yourself deteriorate so far... You’re going to die, you know?”

“Fine with me. I did this because I wanted to.”

“Hmm? Is that so? Ever the goody-goody. Your admirable confession makes me want to vomit,” she flatly declared. “You steal away my good fun and ask a favor of me? You must be dreaming to think I’d do what you ask.”

Vivi’s violet eyes pierced through Yuki. She felt her all-knowing gaze, but couldn’t tell what expression she had. White blotted out most of what she saw.

“But...I know. I don’t mind overlooking it this once.”

“You will?”

“You’re headed to the sacrificial prince, yes?”

Sacrificial prince?

“Never in my years of living would I have guessed *that thing* was your Knight. I even went as far as saving your Knight—you are an awfully ungrateful child.... Well, what’s done is done. Anyhow, I’ll wait for you where that prince is. Hurry and join us.”

Soft footsteps approached Yuki. Something ice-cold caressed both her cheeks—Vivi’s hands encompassed her face. With how close she came, Yuki finally saw her face through the white.

“That is—if you can even make it there.” Vivi’s face twisted with sick amusement.

“Why can’t I?”

“You destroyed my entertainment. You’d better become an even better show to amuse me.”

SNAP! With a rush of sound everything was dyed red. Experience told Yuki she was encompassed by red rose petals.

YUKI had so many questions she wanted to ask. Why was Vivi in Adolunde? What was she doing with the queen? Why was she watching the queen die? Was the cackling in her head all this time Vivi’s voice? Why was Luca a sacrificial prince?

She couldn’t ask a single one of those questions. Because the next time she opened her eyes she was lying on a patch of grass surrounded by the smell of greenery.

“...Nn...gh?”

Unsure of what just occurred, she pushed off the ground. How long had she been unconscious? Some of the weight had lifted from her body. The dizziness had mostly abated. The white spots more or less cleared from her eyes. The sun’s gentle warmth rained down on her.

“Where...am I?” She staggered to her feet. The healthiness she felt was a momentary illusion as her legs buckled and she collapsed on the grass.

...Ow. She lacked the energy to even say ow aloud. Using both her hands to keep from falling a second time, she slowly pulled herself to her feet.

“...te...me...”

Amid the rustling trees and wind, water dripped somewhere—and someone was talking.

Someone's here!

Someone murmured quietly in the distance. Yuki yelled at her wobbly legs to walk in the direction of the voice.

Where am I? How much time has passed?

She couldn't see or walk straight. Tottering along barely got her anywhere. Irritated, she bent forward and put her hands on her knees to take a breath. A few feet's distance felt like miles to her.

“...Tell me, Tiffa.”

“Gah!”

Yuki tripped over a root and stumbled forward. She caught her balance, but her legs tangled and she failed to brace her step.

“Who goes there?!”

“Whoa!”

By the time her mind told her she was going to fall, it was too late—her cheek slammed against the ground, her arms too weak to hold her.

“...This area is off-limits to anyone but the royal family. What business makes you so daring to enter this sacred space?”

I've been noticed. Well, I was trying to catch their attention, but not in this way. Anyway, this place is off-limits to anyone but royalty? Um, uh, what should I say?

Shame over falling in front of someone turned her cheeks bright-red. She rushed to push herself off the ground. Who she saw with her in this off-limits area froze her in place.

Orga...

The prince of her nightmares stood in front of a spring Yuki was all too familiar with.

Chapter 52

WHAT on Earth did Yuki do wrong? What did she do to deserve being punished by being here?

Surprise flickered through Orga's jet-black eyes as his hand shot to the hilt of his jewel-encrusted sword.

"You're..."

"Ah! ...Um...." Yuki flinched. Chills ran along her spine and she scooted backward. Her eyes locked with Orga's. His scowl deepened.

"...I believe I requested you heal Mother? Did I once order you to come to this spring? I did order for everyone to be cleared from this area though."

Orga unsheathed his sword with a crisp metallic cling. He brandished the sword in his right hand and frostily glared at Yuki. Dumbfounded by the sword pointed at her neck, she scooted another foot back. Her skirt chaffed against the grass.

"Um! You see, I..." her voice quivered.

Panic, shock, and mental exhaustion rendered her brain useless. Not knowing why she was there or where there was, she had no way to answer his question. She scanned the area around her from where she sat.

There were still a few hours left before evening. Soft sunlight warmed the grassy area growing around a spring about two thousand square feet in size. Tall trees breaking through the clouds surrounded the area. The spring faced the castle and its reflection glimmered in the sparkling water's surface. Yuki remembered this area well—it was where she first fell into Aridol and was rescued by Luca.

"I did order for everyone to be cleared from this area though."

From what Orga just said...he shouldn't know about the queen yet. She sat up

straight. *Trick him. It's okay. You can fool him. I'll show I can pull one over him. I have the truth on my side after all.*

Tightening her lips in a flat line, she pressed her head against the green grass and prostrated before him.

She said everything at once, “Ah, f-forgive me for such an unsightly display. I finally found you, sire, and in my rush to speak I accidentally tripped! I successfully finished curing the queen and wished to be the first to convey the news to you, Prince Orga. I searched high and low for you and eventually found myself here. Please, please be merciful with me for entering an off-limits area!”

The grass tickled her forehead, causing it to itch. Sudden movement sent her head spinning again. She winced as the throbbing wouldn't stop even with her eyes closed and waited painfully for his response.

How many minutes flew by? It probably wasn't more than a minute of silence, but it felt like hours before he answered her.

“...I see. You have my thanks.”

Metal scraped against metal—Orga sheathed his sword. Yuki soundlessly sighed.

But something doesn't seem right...

A sense of impending doom unsettled her. At first, she chalked it up to her health, but that had been an impending crisis for a while now, so she tossed that conclusion aside and racked her brain for another reason.

“...Your appearance here must be some kind of destined encounter,” Orga said over her, his voice wavering unreliably.

Destined encounter? Yuki fearfully lifted her head—she gasped when she saw his face. *Who is this?!* Her first impulse was to doubt her eyes. There was no question the man standing over her was Orga. However...

Why is he making that face?

All Yuki ever saw in his features was hatred, contempt, and arrogance. He always exuded an icy aura of command and dominance. Yet the man in front of her had no semblance of the monster in her nightmares as a vague smile

touched his lips.

Orga paid her bewilderment no attention as he stuck his hand in his pocket. He held out his hand with whatever he had pulled out and said, "Take it." When she hesitated to act, he pressed, "I want to see Mother now, so I wish you would hurry."

Yuki jumped to her feet and approached him. Like a wounded animal, she cautiously put out her hand. He placed something with a trace of warmth on her hand.

A Knight's Token and a key?

Orga had given Yuki a violet and silver Knight's Token and a golden key decorated with finely detailed carvings.

"This key goes to the deepest room on the highest floor of this tower.... I want you to cure the child there."

"...Pardon?"

A Violet Knight's Token. A room key. And a request to heal someone sick.

He's talking about...Luca, isn't he?

"But...why?"

Luca and Orga had shown nothing but mutual contempt for each other. Why then would Orga give Yuki Luca's Knight Token and orders to heal him?

The corner of Orga's lips curved. "Why? You ask a strange question, girl. Don't you possess the power to heal? Isn't it natural for you to heal a patient should one be set before you?" he replied, misunderstanding the reason for her question. She frowned. "You shouldn't think about what it means. Taking too much interest in the unrelated leads to destruction. Or are you looking to be destroyed?" he sneered and placed his hand on his sword's hilt.

Yuki quickly took a step back. "N-N-Not at all! I wouldn't think of it!"

"Then hurry to your patient," he said, a self-derisive smile eating away at the effect his menace held. "...I want to know why this happened too."

"What?"

“I’m not talking to you.... If that child wakes up, can you tell him to do as he pleases?”

“Do as he pleases? Are you—”

“It isn’t of concern to you. Tell him exactly what I said word for word. Understand?”

“Ah, y-yes, sire.” Yuki hugged the Knight’s Token and key to her heart. She turned on her heel and stepped forward in search of the door to the tower.

“One more thing—if anyone stops you, show them the Knight’s Token.”

“Y-Yes, sire.”

She clasped the Knight’s Token in both hands. It’d be a lie if she said she wasn’t curious why Orga acted strangely or why he was talking to himself in front of the spring, but joy over gaining a clue to Luca’s whereabouts beat out all questions. Finally, at long, long last she had a guaranteed path to Luca.

Her health was no better, but there was a hop in her step and enough energy to rush up the tower’s spiraling staircase.

Chapter 53

TREMBLING with excitement is common in soldiers experiencing an adrenaline rush—was that what caused Yuki’s whole body to shake uncontrollably? Or was it just a side effect of her bout with anemia? The key clattered against the keyhole because her hands wouldn’t stop shaking.

POP!

“Oh no!”

The key bounced off the keyhole and clanged against the marble floor. The sound echoed from the walls of the silent corridor. She crouched down and fumbled for the key as it kept slipping from her quivering fingertips.

During her ascent up the spiral staircase and through the long, deserted corridors she didn’t run into a soul. The only living being she came across was the guard standing watch over the entrance to the tower. He wordlessly opened the doors for her when she presented the Violet Knight’s Token.

Yuki stared at the grandiose door blocking further progression through the corridor. She surveyed her surroundings thinking this might not be the right room, but her path had to be through this door—there were no other doors aside from the one she used to enter the top floor.

When she successfully got the key to stay in her hand, she squeezed it so tight it dug into her palm—she wasn’t going to let it fall again. Sweat from her hands made the key slippery. She put her left hand on her quivering right hand to steady it. Slowly and ever so carefully, she slid the key into the beautifully shaped keyhole. The shaking of her hand caused the golden key to rattle against the lock.

Breathing in deeply, she pushed the key deeper into the hole. It clicked in place and she gingerly turned it. Clack. The dull sound of the locks releasing reverberated in the still corridor. Even Yuki’s strained breathing had a way of

sounding loud in the ominously quiescent space.

She put her right hand on the embellished doorknob. Debating whether it should be pushed or pulled, she stepped back and yanked on the knob. The heavy door haltingly pulled along the floor until there was enough space for her to squeeze through. Once inside, her anemia came surging back. The scrap of strength she scrounged up to get to the highest floor and inside the room left her like a puff of air and graciously left a pounding headache in its wake.

“...Agh...” Yuki collapsed to her knees and her shoulders trembled with heavy breathing. The sunlit room was dreadfully quiet and her wheezing echoed off the pristine walls.

My head...feels like it's splitting in half...

Buzzing filled her ears. Hammers pounded away on her skull. She had grown accustomed to the pain coming in intermittent bursts, but she could never get used to the searing pain itself. The pain increased with each encounter as if it were adapting to her resilience, finding a new way to cause her misery.

No longer able to find a way to endure this wave of pain, she buckled over and held her hands to her head as agonizing moans ripped from her constricting throat.

“Ugh...aaaah...gaaah...”

Heat scorched her from the inside out as if someone had lit her organs on fire. Everything burned, but she was chilled to the bone. Gooseflesh prickled across her skin. The room flickered in front of her eyes like someone was messing with the light switch. She writhed on the floor to escape the acute pain and icy chill to no avail.

“...Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagggggggggh!” she screamed in an inhuman shriek.

Screams pulled from her lungs and throat, but the sound didn't reach her ears through the buzzing. She couldn't hear anymore. Black spots started to smear her flickering vision. The buzzing receded into the distance that belonged to her senses. Tears fell from her eyes and soundless sobs racked her chest. Her sobs turned to vomiting. Wretched agony soaked her face in tears.

I don't want this. I don't want to lose consciousness here.

She needed to stand at any cost. Wiping the bile from her lips, she lifted her head. She rubbed her eyes and opened them wide to see the room, but all she saw was black.

No way.

Yuki couldn't see a thing. Nothing passed through her iris to her brain. Touching her hands to her face and neck confirmed her head was up and eyes open.

She couldn't hear anything. Nothing covered her ears yet not a single sound passed through—not even the sound of her breathing or sobbing. The distortion in her senses made her feel like the ground was falling out beneath her. A burst of dizziness knocked her sideways and her head impacted the ground. The floor should've been level, but it undulated in waves like the ocean. Nausea welled in her stomach.

Slow-moving darkness began swallowing her piece by piece. Frantically, she flailed and kicked her legs, but she didn't know where to go. Once again, she found herself in a world of black. Yuki had fought long and hard to escape from being devoured whole by the dark—to keep from letting it catch her and entangle her in its wicked snare—but it caught her.

Someone...anyone...

"Save me..." she squeezed out hoarsely.

"All right," replied a prim voice.

Someone reached down into the pit of darkness and grabbed Yuki's arms from where the snares had buried her. She felt herself being pulled out of those vicious depths. An icy hand pressed against her forehead. Her teeth chattered against the cold. Another hand wrapped around the back of Yuki's neck to reassure her and plant her firmly back in reality.

"What a foolish girl you are. You used your power till the brink of death."

"Vi...vi...?"

"In the flesh and blood. Didn't you hear me when I said I'd be waiting for you?"

Yuki clearly heard Vivi talking, but nothing else. She couldn't comprehend why she couldn't move her head. Incapable of responding, her head hung limply against the hand holding her up.

Something rushed through her as the icy, soft hand sucked out all the stagnant, rotting darkness permeating her body. The sensation lasted for but half a minute. Vivi's hands let go of her. Yuki blinked. The blackness cleared from her eyes and her deadweight body felt astonishingly light.

"W...hy?"

Suffering for months from chronic illness had her forget what it felt like to have a body free of aches, pain, and dizziness.

"Why? Funny question. Didn't you just ask to be saved?" Clad in a dress patched together from pink and red swatches, Vivi shrugged. "And...it's also a little reward for making it this far."

"R-Reward...?"

Vivi flashed a devious smile and lifted Yuki's chin with her finger. "Yes. It's a prior *investment* in you because you've a long ways to go in entertaining me."

"I don't...understand..."

"Who said you needed to understand anything? It's for my entertainment, not yours. Don't you think you should get back to entertaining me? You know the whole saving people thing? To the place where your Knight is? He's gonna die pretty soon. Unless you're okay with that. Then you can chill here on the floor doing nothing."

Vivi jerked Yuki's chin to the side. They were in the parlor room. Floor-to-ceiling windows were decorated with white lace curtains. A large mahogany desk with a comfy chair faced one of the windows. A satin sofa sat in the center of the room and on the other side of it stood an imposing door.

Yuki's heart dropped. She knew Vivi wasn't lying when she said Luca was going to die soon.

"Luca!" she screamed.

She pushed off the ground. Her knees buckled from the fear he might already

be dead. She dashed for the door and fell against it as her legs gave out. Pushing through the exhaustion, she shoved the door open with all her might. Whatever Vivi had done, Yuki's stamina was back and the door easily opened.

A spacious room the size of a small house was on the other side of the door. Stark white walls marked by windows with simple white curtains surrounded only one object in the room—a gigantic white bed.

Yuki gasped and forgot to exhale. Surrounded on all sides by pure white, someone slept within the folds of cloth. Even from the corner of the room, their face was bloodied from pocks and hives. If not for the smooth, golden hair she had been so familiar with—no, if not for prior knowledge it was him—she would have never been able to tell who it was sleeping there.

“Luca!” the name burst from her lips in a pitch closer to a shriek than a shout. She pitched forward in a dash for his bed. The momentum sent her tripping over the decorative rug. Shooting out her hands, she braced for impact against the soft rug. Shock rattled her and she scraped the tip of her nose.

“What a sight. You’re not a child or have your looks deceived you into thinking you’re one? Is this really the time to be a clichéd idiot and slip?” Vivi cackled. “Truly, what a pathetic heroine you are!”

Yuki ignored her and pushed off the ground. She made a mad dash for the bed.

“...!” She sharply inhaled when she saw Luca's face.

Swaddled in pure-white sheets and blankets, Luca's festering hives ruptured before her eyes in a grotesque eruption of pus and blood. From a distance she hadn't noticed how much blood oozed from his orifices, dyeing the sheets, his clothes, and skin a dark-red.

It's the same...

Luca's symptoms were a mirror of the queen's. His case of Ten Day Fever progressed at a horrifying, unheard-of speed. A vise squeezed her heart at the pitiful state her Knight was in. It took all her willpower not to turn away.

I should have come here much sooner.

Luca's hair had grown longer than the last time she saw him. His eyebrow length bangs had grown past his cheeks.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for being late.

There was so much she wanted to say to him, but the words were stuck in her throat.

"I'm...sorry," she choked out. However, the unconscious man in front of her had no reply.

Yuki clambered up the bed and leaned over Luca's body to get a clear view of his golden hair and bright-red face. She placed her hands around his cheeks. At some point during the constant use of her powers, she had gained a sense of how to control it. She honed her senses in on her hands and Luca. Immediately, a wave of dizziness struck her. She didn't flinch—she had grown used to that sensation as well.

At once it felt like an avalanche of snow had smashed down on her. Numbness tingled her limbs, the world spun, and black dots blotted her vision.

"Hey," she whispered to him, placing her forehead on his. Luca's sticky blood smeared her forehead. She shut her eyes and spoke to him. "...Luca, get better soon."



Opening her eyes only showed her a world of white. Had a whiteout taken over her vision or was the light from her power this blinding? She couldn't tell anymore.

"I've wanted to see you for so long. Hey...Luca...are you listening?"

Nothing could be seen through the white anymore. Her consciousness slowly faded. But it wasn't uncomfortable this time.

Chapter 54

YUKI snapped awake. She felt a lot like when she accidentally fell back to sleep after her alarm went off and woke up a second time when it was too late to go to school. Panic from sleeping too long forced her mind to an active state. This time she woke up completely aware of her situation.

“...Luca!”

She pushed herself off Luca’s chest, causing a slight dizzy spell. The dizziness didn’t matter; she needed to confirm his condition. She groped around for him—her fingers brushed against rough skin, rubbing off the scabs.

The pustules and pocks had healed into scabs she could peel off.

“...Thank goodness,” she said hoarsely. Through fuzzy vision she ran her hands down his arm in search of the healthy skin color hiding beneath the dried, cracked skin. Luca didn’t look like he was going to wake up anytime soon, but there was relief in knowing he wasn’t going to die.

“Who did you get such a bad case of the Ten Day Fever from?” she cursed under her breath and weakly collapsed on him. Her head rested on his abdomen. The rhythmic up-down movement from his breathing lolled her back to sleep.

“Isn’t the answer obvious? He had the same exact symptoms as the queen.”

Yuki’s eyes snapped open at what sounded like Vivi confessing to being the origin of Luca’s illness. She lifted her head from his stomach and looked behind her. Vivi lay on her stomach on the end of the bed kicking her feet up and down and grinning like the Cheshire cat.

“Why...?” she coughed.

Why did Vivi do something so horrible? How can she be calm and not feel any guilt for the awful thing she has done?

Vivi rolled off the bed and eyed Yuki with disdain and disgust. “Why? Do you have to ask? It’s her punishment, obviously. That wretched woman used a hex to try to kill me. I just turned her own hex back on her. And then she contracted a strange case of the Ten Day Fever. That’s all there is to it.”

“A...hex?”

“Aaah, right, you don’t know anything about anything. Shouldn’t you do something about that? For your information, a hex is a curse. Humans have no power over words like we do—they require a sacrifice. It’s a form of ancient black magic even humans can use.”

Curse. Hex. Sacrifice—sacrificial prince. What did the queen, who Vivi demeaned a wretched woman, sacrifice to cast the hex?

“She...sacrificed Luca for her hex...?”

“Haven’t I been saying that all this time?! I can’t understand why you would heal the woman who sacrificed your Knight and nearly killed him.”

“But why would the...queen do it?”

Why Luca?

“Good question,” Vivi responded, putting her index finger to the side of her chin and cocking her head like an adorable child trying to decide what ice cream she wanted. “‘I want to kill that Witch! But I can’t even touch her with my measly power. I know, I’ll curse her to death! But to do so, I need a sacrifice. And a high-grade one to have any effect.’ Isn’t that what went through her miserable little head? And then it occurred to her: ‘I can use *those children* I have no use for,’” Vivi said, mimicking the queen’s voice.

“What the hell...?”

Who are the children she has no use for?

“Any child will do aside from the ones she birthed—all others are fair game. One of the sacrifices already died. The first hex caught me by surprise, so that wretched woman weaseled her way out of my quick-fire retaliation.”

“One of the sacrifices...?”

When she first met Rifaenotis, he had informed her Adolunde’s Third Prince

had died of the Ten Day Fever.

“Don’t tell me...”

Vivi nodded and swung on one of the posts decorating the four-poster bed.

Poor guy.

Yuki turned away from Vivi and examined Luca’s face. He slept peacefully with his face encrusted with reddish-brown scabs. Seeing his chest move with regular, stabilized breathing brought a tremendous amount of sadness to her. Had she been any later, he would have ended up like the other sacrifice whose breathing had stopped.

“...Why did you punish the sacrifice as well? Isn’t that unfair? I mean...they didn’t do anything wrong. They were the victims here...yet—”

“You really are a foolish girl. They weren’t innocent bystanders who did nothing. They used their entire body and soul as a source of power to curse me. Even if they weren’t a willing party in it. Their hand in it is a fact and the result is all that matters. For all you know, your Knight might have despised me from the depths of his soul. If he did, it’d be his lifelong desire to be sacrificed to get at me.”

“Luca would never—”

“Yes, yes, he might not. Naïve, naïve, little Yuki. Do you understand what you’ve done?”

“What?”

Vivi grabbed Yuki by the collar and pulled her up. Yuki’s dress squeezed around her neck, choking her. Vivi lifted Yuki in the air with a strength mismatched with her ten-year-old appearance. She brought Yuki’s face to hers and sneered.

“It means you saved the life of the wretched woman who tried to kill me.”

The red in Vivi’s violet eyes deepened and wavered. Yuki realized too late it was a preliminary sign of Vivi’s anger.

Vivi spoke with a smile cold enough to freeze an ocean, “...But I guess the timing is just right. Things are only getting worse, and I’ve lost interest in

looking after it. This might be the time to make a once in a lifetime risky gamble.”

“Gamble...on what?” Yuki coughed and clawed at the collar of her dress to keep it from cutting off circulation to her throat.

“You’re asking questions again. You ask about every little thing, don’t you?”

“I’m...sorry.”

What in the world was Vivi thinking? Yuki hadn’t the faintest idea what she was talking about. All she knew was the primary cause of the queen’s Ten Day Fever was the queen herself, but Vivi had put Luca in danger to exact her revenge. Vivi’s fury wouldn’t be staved now that Yuki had saved the queen. And she was angry with Yuki for what she had done.

Her mind was stuck trying to think of a way to apologize. She didn’t know the details, but the queen had put Luca’s life in danger. While she wondered why, she didn’t feel resentment or anger toward her. Question marks floated over her head and she was more concerned with wanting answers than becoming emotionally charged.

But...even if I knew what the queen had done, I wouldn’t have left her to die.

“...Your thoughts are written all over your face.”

“They are?”

“Wow. Are there daisies growing in your brain? How gullible and naïve can you be?” Vivi released her hold on Yuki’s collar. Yuki fell back onto the bed. “You aren’t quaking in fear of me because I’m not all that angry.... Oh, don’t be mistaken, it’s inexcusable to try to kill me, but I can kill the wretched woman with nary a moment’s thought.”

“...You can?”

“You know, I’ve been patiently waiting here for you to fearfully ask me, ‘Vivi, whatever should I do? I’m lost without your guidance!’ ...But it looks like you’ve gotten impudent while I took my eyes off you. I can’t believe you’ve become this defiant.”

“I-I’m not being defiant...”

“You are too. You don’t look remorseful for what you’ve done?” Vivi snickered and went to say more, but suddenly turned toward the door. “Someone’s here.”

“They are?!” Startled, Yuki looked toward the open door leading to the parlor room. The latched door didn’t move. Vivi glanced at Luca and then at the door.

“...This boy possesses something interesting.” She smiled complacently at Yuki and snapped her fingers. Vivi’s body turned into a storm of red rose petals and dispersed.

“Wait! Vivi!” she shouted at the rose petals. The rose petals rapidly turned transparent until they disappeared completely. The intense fragrance of roses was the only trace of her left. “What do I do?!”

Flustered, she glanced around the room. Who was coming? Why? For what purpose?

“Shouldn’t the door be locked to keep everyone out?!”

“Servants are sent to change his sleeping position.”

Rhad’s statement rang through her ears. She considered the possibility of their unwelcome guest being a servant, but Rhad told her he had bribed the servants to give them space today. Did Orga send soldiers after her?

“...He shouldn’t have.”

If Orga wanted her captured, he wouldn’t have given her the freedom and keys to Luca. Yuki’s poor health made it difficult to think, but Orga seemed different at the time, almost distraught. For the first time, she thought she saw the human behind the monster.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What should we do, Luca?!”

Panicked, she crawled up the bed next to his face. Sitting beside his face still left plenty of room between them on the bed. She stared down at Luca’s face. She shook his shoulders, but the tranquil look of sleep didn’t change.

“I need to get under the bed!” Yuki leapt from the bed at the speed of light and rolled up the pure-white blankets to find her hopes dashed. “...Why is it made of wood all the way to the floor? ...Isn’t it normal for there to be storage

space under a bed?!”

A solid, amber wood frame covered the area where there should have been space. Yuki roughly yanked down the covers and shook Luca’s shoulders like a madwoman.

“Hey, Luca! Luca! Someone’s here!” His neck lolled to the left and right with her shaking. The scabs pulled off his face and tumbled onto his neck every time his face touched the sheets. “...It’s no use...”

Yuki sucked in a breath and exhaled. She glanced at the parlor door—no one was turning the knob trying to open it.

“Vivi said someone is here, but...they aren’t trying to come in.” Quite some time had passed during her horrid attempts to find a hiding spot and wake up Luca and yet the door hadn’t been opened.

“Come on, Luca, someone’s—” Yuki said, looking at Luca. Her heart skipped a beat. “Luca!”

Luca’s brow furrowed and he moaned. “.....”

“Wh-Wh-What’s wrong?! What is it? Are you okay?!” Whatever else was going on, she needed to wake him up. She reached out to shake his shoulders.

“...Lady...”

“What?”

A heartrending expression contorted his features. This same expression vividly haunted her memories.

“No matter what I do, you won’t disappear.”

When was it that Yuki had come across Luca in the middle of the night while he was drunk out of his mind? He had confused her with someone else then too.

“Please call my name. Say, ‘Luca’.”

She said his name for the first time that night.

“...Luca.”

He grimaced painfully and shook his head back and forth, knocking his long

bangs over his eyes.

“Are you all right...?” she asked, knowing she wouldn’t get a reply. She brushed his bangs aside.

“...Lady...E...Wh...y...?”

“...!” Yuki’s hand stopped in the middle of brushing his bangs aside. Tears had filled the crusted over eyes beneath the bangs. Her heart hammered against her chest. Unease settled over her.

What is this?

She struggled to keep herself calm. Her heart pounded. His almost white eyelashes were soaked with tears. Yuki always thought he had a handsome face. He looked like he walked off the pages of a storybook. How could she become aware of how close he was when his face was covered in scabs and blood?

“No...”

What was she denying? Not even Yuki knew the answer. She didn’t understand, but was pressured by the feeling she had to say it.

“Don’t cry...” She combed his hair back with her right hand and wiped his tears with the left. Her heart raced the entire time she softly touched his face with her thumb.

Until now, she had never hesitated to touch him, but some impulse had her reluctant to do it now.

Is it okay for me to touch you? She wanted to ask him even though he was unconscious. Luca moaned, deliriously mumbling in his sleep. He was calling the name of someone Yuki didn’t know. Instantly, discomfort sunk from her heart to the pit of her stomach and twisted.

“...Whose name are you calling for? I’m...Yuki...”

Yuki grimaced along with Luca’s agonized moans.

Chapter 55

RATTLE! The faint sound of someone shaking the parlor's doorknob reached Yuki's ears. She stiffened and her thumbnail accidentally scratched the skin under Luca's eye. Warily, she looked over her shoulder through the bedroom to the parlor door.

Rattle! She saw the knob turning as it rattled against the lock.

Now isn't the time for me to be captivated by Luca's good looks... She mentally berated herself and shook her head.

"I-It's not like I was too entranced by his face to move!" she denied, making excuses to herself.

Wh-Wh-What do I do now? Under the bed isn't an option and there's nothing in this room aside from the bed.

The massive white bed and lace curtains were the only fixtures in the unreasonably spacious room. See-through lace nixed the curtains as a possible hiding place. She cursed whoever thought transparent curtains were a good choice.

"...Mende? You are in there, are you not, Rhadal Mende? Haven't you had enough time? Will you let me in already?" a woman asked from the other side of the door. Cornered, Yuki fixed her eyes on the door. The woman rattled the knob and knocked impatiently. "The time we agreed on has long since passed. Why haven't you come for me?"

The elegance in her voice despite her apparent agitation let Yuki know there was a noblewoman standing outside the door. But why was a noblewoman allowed where even servants were eliminated once they finished their job?

She knows Rhad is supposed to be here... What does she mean he was going to get her? Did he plan to bring her here?

"Oh, was I turning the knob the wrong way? The door is unlocked. If you are

inside, won't you please open this door for me?" Yuki's silence roused an impatient screech from the woman, "Rhadal Mende! It is only because I had your promise you would allow me to see Lucat that I had the servants and guards cleared from the area. It's not fair for only you to see Lucat! Don't hog him to yourself!"

The door clamored as she tugged on the knob to yank it open. However, the woman was too weak to open the heavy door. Her groans as she put her whole weight into pulling back on it echoed through the corridor and into the room.

Spurred by her panic, Yuki wiped the remaining tears from Luca's eyes—she didn't want anyone else to see he had cried. She jumped down from the mattress and straightened the covers. She checked Luca to find he had stopped moaning and was back to sleeping peacefully.

I'm glad... Even if he were only suffering in his dreams, she didn't want him to suffer at all. *The person at the door doesn't seem to be a soldier.*

Yuki watched the door creak as it cracked open. Once it had some momentum, the inertia made it easier to pull. Enough space for a small person to slip through appeared between the door and wall.

Just like Yuki had earlier, a woman slipped in through the small space. The skirts of a pearl beige dress swayed with her effort to squeeze through. Her exposed white shoulders were covered with a shawl the same color as her fancy dress. Long, light-blue curls bobbed and swayed with her dress as she rushed inside before the door crushed her. Her graceful features were delicately framed between her pearl-white skin and light-blue hair.

Wow, what a gorgeous woman...

Yuki stared at the intruder from where she stood beside Luca's bed. The intruder called for Rhad and restlessly searched the parlor for him until her eyes met Yuki's in the bedroom.

"...Oh, hello. Is Rhad not here?"

"Um..."

The intruder noticed the bed next to Yuki and gracefully strode over to them without an ounce of hesitation.

“Did I not give the orders I would be the one to reposition Lucat today?” the woman inquired reproachfully and glowered at Yuki through emerald eyes hidden under long, blue lashes.

Yuki racked her brain to comprehend the situation. Rhad had said he used a last-ditch method to have the room cleared of servants and guards. The only reasonable conclusion then was the beautiful woman advancing on her had something to do with his plan.

What did he promise her in return for her assistance?

“...Are you deaf? I have given you the order to leave. Rhad must not have arrived yet. Rhadal Mende is about to arrive in these chambers with a skilled doctor. As you have already been informed, I shall take on all work dealing with Lucat for the day. Leave.”

The noblewoman appeared to be in her mid-twenties. She looked down on Yuki with the ferocity of a lioness protecting her cubs. Her attitude irked Yuki, but her cocky explanation helped piece together what Rhad had promised.

“I am that skilled doctor. I had Rhad...return to his station. Forgive me, but who might you be?”

The noblewoman’s perfect mask of indifference crumbled at Yuki’s surprising declaration. Drawing her own conclusions, the woman sneered. “Oh, yes, I totally forgot the ‘Miracle Girl’ was said to come from a remote village in the boondocks. I’m Shae Revent—Lucat’s Master. Now that you are no longer ignorant, show me the reverence I deserve.”

“Huh...EXCUSE ME?!”

Shae’s high-handed impudence took Yuki by surprise.

She’s Luca’s Master?! How is that even possible? I’m supposed to be Luca’s Master.

Yuki gaped at Shae who stood a head taller than her. Beguiling emerald-green eyes stared down at her judgmentally. She thoughtfully brought her hand to her mouth. Yuki’s eyes locked onto what donned her right hand.

“Ho...w?”

A familiar ring sat on Shae's pinkie finger. The silver ring glowed violet—a symbol only a Master of a Violet Knight could wear.

"...Are you mentally deficit? I already told you it is because I'm Lucat's Master."

"No, that can't be!"

Because I'm Luca's Master! Yuki shouted in her heart, but didn't say aloud because she wasn't sure if she should. Nothing in her possession would prove her point. For some reason, the only physical evidence adorned Shae's finger.

"...He's already contracted...with someone else," she mumbled. Yuki was indeed his Master, but her confidence in that truth waned when someone else had her ring.

"Oh. You are referring to the Witch, yes? That Witch was rightfully burned at the stake. I am now Lucat's Master," Shae stated as if she were speaking of nothing more important than the weather.

...What the heck?

The Witch was rightfully burned at the stake. Did that mean even her contract with Luca assumed she had been killed? Word of the Legendary Witch and Rvydom's princess being executed by Maruk had undeniably been spread across the land. But Yuki hadn't been killed and was standing right here. Terribly confused, she couldn't make sense of anything.

Losing her patience, Shae snapped, "You are unrelated to this matter. Won't you hurry and do your job and heal Lucat?"

"Eh, um—"

"What a relief the Witch died. Her actions are the reason Lucat was made to suffer in this way."

"...What do you...mean?"

"Oh yes, someone such as yourself would be completely disconnected from the Knights. You needn't be ashamed you have no knowledge of them with your standing," she snickered mockingly. "What do you believe is necessary between a Knight and their Master?"

“Necessary?” Yuki repeated.

Yuki recalled the different Knight and Master pairings she knew about: herself and Luca, Vigo and Selena, Tita and Nasette. What did they have in common between them? Something Selena said to her a while ago came to mind.

“...The resolve to stay together for a lifetime?” she offered.

“It’s nothing so trivial.” Disgusted by the way Shae mocked everything she said, Yuki frowned. “When a Knight and Master bond together through the contract, the Knight’s physical strength is dramatically increased. The amount of strength they receive from their Master varies on an individual basis. What do you think is the foundation for it?”

Yuki couldn’t hide her surprise that she was still unaware of something critical to the Knight and Master relationship. She had been under the impression the Knight’s power amplification was the same for everyone when they bonded or based on their color rank.

“I don’t know,” she answered, shaking her head.

With a heavenly smile and dreamy eyes, Shae spoke, “Their feelings of affection.”

“...Are you kidding me?” The answer was so ridiculous Yuki wanted to write off the woman as mad right away. How could something immeasurable be the determining factor?

“A Knight without a splinter of affection from their Master is no different from an ordinary human. The more affection and feelings the Master has for their Knight, the stronger the Knight becomes,” Shae dreamily intoned as if she were drunk on the concept. Her drunken stupor broke and animosity turned her beautiful face ugly.

“And this is why it’s all that horrible Witch’s fault! I have no doubt the Witch forced a contract on Lucat to use and abuse him! This terrible situation happened because the Witch didn’t have an ounce of affection for Lucat! If only he had contracted with me before her, this would have never happened to him!”

Yuki’s heart dropped.

“...How does that work?”

Shae ignored Yuki’s question and prattled on, “...But I do have to be grateful to the Witch for one thing. Thanks to her trickery, Lucat became available to contract with again. Anyways, are you not finished healing Lucat yet? Is the power lauded by rumors to be a miracle nothing more than an exaggeration?”

“...et...out...”

“What did you just say?”

“I said to please get out!” Her heart hammered in her ears. The intense flow of blood stimulated her tear ducts. She grabbed Shae’s shoulder and pushed her out of the bedroom. “You are disrupting the treatment! Please leave!”

Thunderstruck someone dare lay a hand on her, Shae caught her balance and retreated. Yuki slammed the bedroom door and locked it. She leaned against the door and slid down to her butt.

“How dare you! Open this door this instant!” demanded Shae.

Yuki expected her to pound on the door, but her noble upbringing kept her from such brutish behavior. Instead, she settled on shouting demands and ladylike curses at the door. Her abusive language was muffled by the thick door and Yuki couldn’t make much out aside from the anger in the other woman’s voice.

“...The power level changes based on how much affection you have for the Knight? What the heck kind of fairytale power is this? The power of love? Is this some sick cliché?” Yuki grumbled.

“And this is why it’s all that horrible Witch’s fault!”

Shae’s spiteful voice replayed in her mind, blaming her. Yuki’s heart squeezed and she pulled her knees to her chest. The degree of affection correlated one to one with the amount of power the Knight received. Luca contracted the Ten Day Fever despite being a Knight when Knights were supposed to be immune to all but a common cold. Not only did he not recover, but his health was on a one-way trip to self-destruction.

“This terrible situation happened because the Witch didn’t have an ounce of

affection for Lucat!"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she asked the words replaying in her mind.

Sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed, she couldn't see the man lying on top. She momentarily escaped from reality thinking it was a good thing she couldn't see him. Were she to see him now, she'd want to disappear from him for good.

Yuki had been confident she could cure Luca. Now she was deeply ashamed of her confidence.

"The reason Luca caught the Ten Day Fever and didn't get better...is all my fault..."

Rhad had said they could be reunited if Luca caught the Ten Day Fever. Although that wasn't how she wanted to see him again, she was happy to lay eyes on his face once more. Yet now her heart ached.

"What is with this world?!"

Had Luca recovered from the Ten Day Fever on his own they could have reunited in a different way. But that day never came.

The cause for all his misery lay entirely with Yuki.

Chapter 56

HOW long had Yuki kept her face buried in her knees? Shae had stopped shouting at the door. She had either given up and left, or waited on the sofa for Yuki to finish. Either way, Yuki didn't feel like checking because she didn't want to see her face. Sliding down the door to her butt had rolled her skirt up and exposed her thighs to the chilly air in the room.

Luca...

Sluggishly, she rose to her feet and stumbled over to his bed. She sat heavily on the mattress, the springs squeaked under the new weight. Luca still hadn't opened his eyes. Color had returned to his skin and a sense of tranquility settled over his sleeping face. The pained moans she heard earlier seemed like an illusion.

"...I'm...so...sorry..." She gripped at the dress covering her chest. "It would have been better if we never met.... It would have been better if you had entered a bonding contract with that woman rather than me."

Shae possessed breathtaking looks and a noble upbringing. Yuki believed she didn't even deserve to be compared to someone who astronomically outclassed her.

"Had we never met—had you never made me your Master—you would have never needed to suffer like this."

Yuki reached out her hand and affectionately ran it down the side of his cheek. The dried scabs peeled off under her fingers, leaving a trail of glowing skin behind.

"If I disappeared and that woman took my place loving you...would you stop suffering?"

No one answered. She peered down at Luca's face. His eyelashes didn't even twitch. The only signs of him being alive came from the sound and movement

caused by his regular breathing. Sunlight spilling in from the windows dulled into a dark-orange. Tears rolled down her cheeks and splattered on Luca's cheek.

"It's all my...fault," she whispered.

"That's right. You're the cause," Vivi's voice boomed. A whirlwind of red rose petals filled the room.

"Vivi!"

Vivi's cackling bounced off the walls. It wasn't windy inside, but the rose petals danced from the floor to the ceiling. Vivi's voice and cackling came from all directions. The petals swirled around Yuki as if each one was an embodiment of Vivi. Within the blink of an eye, the petals and cackling vanished. In their place was Vivi sitting on the opposite side of Luca with her back to Yuki.

"Aaah, what an amusing show. You should've seen your face! I'm in pain from stifling my laughter." Vivi turned only her neck toward Yuki. Pure bliss perfectly described her complacent grin. "On top of getting your Knight deathly sick, *your* ring was taken and worn by another woman! Can you be any more of a failure Master, or what? Not only did you not have a connection or bond—you have nothing with him at all."

"....."

Vivi was absolutely right, which is why Yuki had nothing to say. She hung her head in shame, the torment she felt showing on her face.

Unconcerned with Yuki's depression, Vivi continued through her silence, "So? What are you going to do?"

Yuki's head jerked up at the abrupt question. Seriousness replaced the pleased grin on Vivi's face.

"You interfered with my pleasure," Vivi supplied when Yuki didn't answer her.

"...That's not—" Yuki trailed off. She didn't know Vivi was involved and she couldn't let someone suffering in front of her go unattended when she could save them. Above all else, she saved the queen to gain access to Luca.

"It doesn't really matter. It's just through your actions I failed to accomplish

what I planned on doing.”

“What you planned on doing? You mean kill the queen?”

“The *queeeeen*? Ha! Nothing so worthless. What I’m referring to is this world.”

“This world?” Yuki didn’t follow the sudden leap in topics.

“Yes. War has swept the world into chaos. Invasions and tyranny are running rampant. Killing, being killed, and more killing. An ocean of blood is being shed. Those things are slowly disturbing the world’s equilibrium.”

Aridol was strained with countless wars. Blood was shed, sorrow abounded, and happiness was stripped. Learning Vivi grieved over the war made her more relatable to Yuki. Vivi flashed a wicked grin when Yuki nodded. She was all too familiar with this expression—it was the one Vivi used whenever she was scheming.

“With that said, Yuki, why don’t we play a game? This game will be just a *smidge* harder than the last one. There are only two results,” Vivi held up two fingers, “will the world crumble first or will you restore the equilibrium?”

“...What kind of game is that? This isn’t a funny joke, Vivi.”

“Joke? Now that’s the real joke. I’m always one-hundred percent serious. I’ve grown sick of it,” she intoned loudly. “There’s something that had to be done. It didn’t have to be me who did it. But I still did it, you know? I’m so sick of doing it and then someone had to go and interfere with the job I already didn’t want to do. I’ve lost all interest in doing it now. So I’m handing the torch over to you whether you want it or not. Got it?” she asked, her lips curling.

The smile would have been cherubic if not for the evil glint in her violet eyes. Her smile instilled cold-hard fear into Yuki. “I don’t really care. I don’t care if this world falls apart or whatever else may come.”

“Fall apart? ...You’re getting too abstract for me to understand what the heck you’re talking about.”

Cackling, Vivi flipped onto the bed and crawled over to Yuki until their faces nearly touched. “Every single volcano across Aridol will erupt. And monsters will

come pouring out. I've already heard the small monsters are popping out and attacking people in mountains more frequently recently—enhanced beasts, a tad stronger than normal. But they're nothing compared to the real monsters who will come."

"Monsters..."

Yuki once heard about how on extremely rare occasions monsters will appear in Aridol. She heard the stories, but she hadn't seen pictures of them, much less the real thing.

"The dragon will awaken and monsters will run rampant. The world will return to its beginning. Put simply: the world will reset itself and start anew."

"Dragon?"

Yuki dug through her memories to see if she had heard anything about a dragon. Irritation slowly bubbled inside her at Vivi's offhanded explanation. She didn't understand what Vivi was after, what she wanted, or why she was telling her these things. Would she answer if asked?

"...Why?"

"Again with the whys. Didn't you hear my answer the first time? I'm tossing my bets and investing in you."

"Investing in me...?"

"I saved your life. As such, you have an obligation to entertain me. Furthermore, you interrupted and interfered with my fun, thus stripping yourself of any right to refuse me. That's. What. This. Means," she stressed.

Yuki's jaw dropped. What did she mean? An obligation to entertain Vivi. The price for interfering with what she was doing. Those things didn't add up to playing a game with the world on the line. This wasn't a funny joke.

The world is going to...fall apart.

She couldn't fathom what it meant for the world to fall apart. Monsters appearing didn't mean much to her when she had never encountered one before. Sure, she had a concept of monsters from movies, but how they would be in reality exceeded her imagination. Back in Japan, she had studied about

global warming in school and how an increase in heat would melt the polar icecaps sending Earth back to the Ice Age. But global warming seemed like a different kind of world ending than falling apart or crumbling under the threat of monsters and dragons.

Things are going to return to the beginning? What was this world's beginning?

In her own way, Vivi was trying to impart crucial information to Yuki, but it wasn't sinking in.

"...Why?" she asked again.

"I told you it's because I've grown sick of it. That's why, Yuki, you need to put your life on the line to do the best you can to entertain me."

"...That's not fair."

It was as if someone had given her a math test with a problem that didn't have a formula—she needed to solve the problem without knowing how to do it. As Yuki became overwhelmed and dispirited, Vivi's elation grew.

"I like you, Yuki. You're honest to a fault and are more ignorant than a fool. I'm titillated and filled with fondness for precious little Yuki. So do your best, would ya? This is a game. The stakes are the world itself. I'm positive this will be a thrilling and fun game, Yuki," Vivi chirped. Sparkles glimmered in her eyes and she hopped on the bed like an excited child.

Once she got this way there was no stopping her. Filled with despair, Yuki could only watch Vivi bounce away.

"...That's a big game for just one person," said a terribly nostalgic voice.

Yuki had longed to hear that voice for so long she thought she was hearing things. Paralyzed, she couldn't turn toward where she heard it. Barely managing to cast down her eyes, she saw the sky-blue eyes fringed by platinum lashes blink on the face of the person who had been sleeping.

...How?

When someone is unduly shocked, it renders them speechless. Luca's eyes were open. He stirred in bed and clumsily pushed himself upright. Too stunned to do anything, Yuki dumbly stared at Luca's back as he got up. His sky-blue

eyes wouldn't look at her—his gaze was locked on Vivi.

“Oh? You were awake? Is it all right for a gentlemanly prince to eavesdrop on a lady's conversation?”

“It's not a problem. I would have learned of it sooner or later,” he said smoothly, casting doubts on if he was really in a coma for months.

“Good for you.... You've spiked my interest in how you would have learned of it. Yuki might not have told you? How would you get it out of her? Torture? Seduction? Sex?”

“...It doesn't matter. Do you care if two people take part in this game of yours?”

“There would have to be someone whose head is so messed up they would be interested in playing. I'd say you can do what you want?”

“Can I?”

“You see, I've started to have itty-bitty expectations of Yuki and her newfound impudence.”

“...Is that so?”

“Well then, I'll be watching you.”

Their conversation went through one ear and out the other. Yuki heard their voices and saw their lips moving, but their words meant nothing to her. Luca had his back to Yuki and she couldn't see his face.

“The rest is up to your *discretion*! I'm looking forward to seeing how you play the game! See ya!” Vivi smirked. With a snap, she transformed into bright-red rose petals and scattered away.

The strong scent of roses filled the room. Even after the petals turned transparent and disappeared, Yuki couldn't move an inch. Luca's once white pajamas were dyed scarlet with his dried blood. Patches of darkish-brown and white stained the rest of the material.

“.....”

Silence filled the space between them. There was no wind, sounds from the

town, or trees rustling to ease the quietness. Only the sound of Yuki's hammering heart pounded in her ears.

Finally. I've finally reunited with him. He's alive. He's moving. He's awake.

Yuki's tears fell without pause. The inside of her nose twitched and heat built behind her eyes.

"...It's cold in here, isn't it?" Luca remarked, breaking the silence first. "It appears I've been asleep for a very long time.... I've also put you through a lot." He didn't turn around to look at her. His back was still pointed toward her, but she still vehemently shook her head.

"That's not true! You didn't do anything wrong! I-I...I..."

I was at fault for all of it. Those words lodged in her throat and wouldn't come out. Tears continued to fall; she could only suck in ragged breaths through her sobs.

"...Luca," she hoarsely whispered.

The mattress springs squeaked as the back in front of her twisted around.

Red. White. Gold and sky blue.

The instant all those colors filled her vision, they were consumed by a plethora of bright-red rose petals.

Chapter 57

Luca was in for a surprise when his eyes met Yuki's and she instantly transformed from her sixteen-year-old body back to her ten-year-old appearance. She answered every question he asked about what had happened since they separated—from the beginning of spring when she was nearly burned at the stake till the end of fall when she came to Adolunde.

She filled him in on how she was rescued by the Legendary Witch, met Rifaenotis in Rvydom, and traveled with Selena and Vigo around Rvydom to Adolunde. The state of the war and Rvydom's plan to regain their independence also found their way into the conversation. However, she couldn't bear to tell him about the burns on her chest, the torture she went through, or the fact the queen had sacrificed his life to kill Vivi. By the time she finished telling him everything, the orange sky had turned completely dark.

"...I really did sleep for a long time."

"Yeah. But why..." she trailed off.

Why did this happen? Luca easily guessed her unspoken question and answered as he looked into the distance, "My quarrel with Brother led to me being chained in the dungeon.... Apparently, Mother wanted to use me as a sacrificial pawn in one of her curses."

"...!"

"...You knew?"

Yuki nodded and suddenly remembered she forgot to tell him.

"...If that child wakes up, can you tell him to do as he pleases?"

She shoved her hand into the dress that shrunk to fit her new size and pulled out the violet and silver Knight's Token.

"...This is from Orga."

“From Brother?”

“Yeah. Also, he said to do as you please.”

Luca stared at the Knight’s Token in her tiny hand before taking it.

“...Is that so?” Luca answered expressionlessly. Yuki couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“...Luca.”

“Shall we get going?”

“Going? Where to?”

“Rvydom,” he answered, scooting out of bed. Scabs peeled off as he moved, exposing fresh skin on his arms and legs.

“Wh-What?!” Luca boldly walked forward, leaving Yuki alone on the bed.
“Why?”

“I promised Lord Galian.”

Luca’s promise to Lord Galian was to assist in Rvydom’s independence war.

“...Luca!” Yuki slipped from the bed and yanked on the back of his shirt.
“Why...Why?! Rvydom will start a foolish war for independence while Maruk and Adolunde are already at war! Tell me! Why must we go to war?”

Why did people have to hurt each other? Why couldn’t anything be resolved without shedding blood? Was it such a bad thing to be powerless?

“Who knows for sure? Isn’t it because we have no other choice?” he answered without turning around.

“What kind of answer is that?” she huffed.

“Each nation embraces its own beliefs and sense of justice. You could even say it’s a matter of pride. War takes place to protect those things,” he said, turning toward her. He looked down at Yuki who gripped the clothes soaked with his blood. The blood hadn’t dried yet. “Everyone seeks peace and prosperity for their own people. They go to war to get rid of whatever is in the way of those pursuits.”

“Seriously? I don’t get it.... What the heck kind of reasoning goes into stealing

someone else's peace to live peacefully? It's not right to start a war for no reason! It doesn't make sense! This is too messed up!"

"...I agree. That's exactly why." Luca's large hand captured Yuki's. When she looked up, his handsome, scab covered face was there. If it wasn't just her imagination, the corners of his cracked lips were turned up. "We're going to Rvydom. We need to do something about these wars after all."

The taut cord inside Yuki finally relaxed, releasing the tension building up in her since she found herself alone in the world.

I'm not the only one. Luca is also trying to do something about the wars. Relief came with the knowledge he didn't want war either. The people of Rvydom seethed with a desire for revenge against Maruk. Fear kept Yuki from admitting her disapproval of them starting a war.

Thank goodness.

She squeezed the large hand encasing hers. Luca's hand was as chilly as it ever was. Where were they going from here? An unseeable future awaited them. Regardless, baseless reassurance filled her for the first time in months.

LUCA scrubbed the scabs off his face, arms, and legs before proceeding out of the room, through the corridor, and down the spiral staircase. Led by the hand, Yuki followed him. A two-word exchange with the guard posted at the entrance of the tower had him rushing off toward the castle.

"Where are we going?"

"To my mansion," Luca said, walking briskly ahead. His long bangs occasionally flopped in his face, obstructing his vision. Agitated, he pushed them back and tried to loop the locks behind his ear, but they popped back after a few steps.

"Your mansion? You don't reside in the castle, Luca?"

Luca glanced down at her and unwillingly explained for her sake. From what he said, in Adolunde each heir to the throne was given their own mansion. Whoever was chosen to inherit the crown moved into the palace. The

remaining heirs lived out the rest of their lives in their mansions.

Yuki asked if the castle would eventually lose its vast territory by constantly cutting out pieces of its land to hand over to the heirs for their lifetime, but Luca responded by saying it wasn't a problem. She didn't quite understand the nitty-gritty details, but the land was taken back once a few generations passed from the current king and given to the next generation of heirs. Moreover, the fight for the throne and the repeated battles resulting from it had never caused a major issue for the castle.

When she complained she still didn't understand, he stopped walking. Yuki stopped behind him. Their chatting had lasted longer than she thought, because they had arrived at their destination.

"...And I thought Rhad's manor was huge."

They weren't even of comparable size—Luca's mansion was ginormous. How many rooms were inside? How big was each room? The mansion was so large it was a joke to try to guess how big it really was.

"I bet you have over a hundred servants..." she muttered in awe.

"About a fifth of that," Luca answered.

"You only have twenty?! Are twenty servants enough for a place this big?" Yuki had to arch her neck back to take in the mansion standing wider and taller than the entire property her high school existed on.

"I normally don't have them clean any rooms aside from the ones I primarily use and a few guest rooms."

"I see...is that how it normally works?"

"I can't say. Brother and my younger siblings hire over a hundred servants to tend their homes."

There weren't any soldiers standing guard at the mansion gates or entrance. Very few rooms had the lights on. Luca passed through the gate and put his hand on the grand door leading inside. It rattled when he turned the knob—the door was locked. He clicked his tongue. Stillness permeated the area. The night gradually grew darker and a cool fall wind brushed against them.

“...Luca.”

“Just wait.”

RUSTLE! Several armed soldiers appeared from the tall bushes lining the pathway to the entrance. They surrounded Yuki and Luca. Two burly soldiers stood in the entryway.

“Who are you?” asked a stern voice from the dusky darkness. It was too dark to see who spoke.

Yuki clenched the corner of Luca’s black cloak. The cloak blended with the dark, almost making Luca melt into the darkness if not for his platinum hair. A familiar sigh came from him.

“...Your spirit to protect the mansion is laudable, but mistaking your master is questionable,” Luca said, pulling his Knight’s Token from his pocket. The soldiers immediately snapped to attention.

“Prince Luca!”

“Prince Luca, what a blessing it is to see you well!”

The soldiers dropped to their knee and bowed their heads.

“I don’t need formalities right now. Would you let me inside my mansion first?”

“Yes, sire!” one of the soldiers promptly responded and called to the door, “Annie, it’s me. Prince Lucat has returned. Open the door.”

“What did you just say?!”

CLACK! The bolts and locks were unlatched one by one and the double doors opened from the center. Someone threw the doors open, forcing the soldiers closest to it to leap out of the way before it hit them. A middle-aged woman dressed in a maid’s attire rushed out of the mansion and put her hands on Luca’s cheeks.

“Prince Luca? Aaaah, you are Prince Luca! It has been far too long since these old eyes were last graced by your presence that this old lady believed she had forgotten your face, but apparently it is impossible to forget such a handsome visage.”

“Drop the sarcasm, Annie.”

“Hehe. I will droll on about how good looking and marvelous you are if you stay away from me too long,” Annie teased, smiling at Luca. She dropped her hands and curtsied before Yuki. “This little lady...is one I have had the honor of serving once before.”

“Her name is Yuki. Prepare a room for her. I’m taking a bath,” Luca said, quickly disappearing inside the mansion. Several servants ran after him.

“Lady Yuki, welcome. Please come inside.”

“Ah, okay...” Yuki stepped inside the mansion as ordered.

This is...Luca’s home...

The mansion was luxurious and grand yet tended to by only a handful of servants. Cleaning must have been a nightmare. The grandiose yet functional mansion was amusingly similar to Luca.

Chapter 58

YUKI had a sense of déjà vu with the day she met Luca for the first time. Annie escorted her to a stately, extravagant room not much different from the one Luca brought her to in the castle more than six months ago.

“It is already quite late, so I will bring you a nightgown,” Annie said with a curtsy before she left to fetch Yuki a change of clothes.

“I can change myself,” Yuki emphasized, too embarrassed to let a group of maids strip her down again.

Annie dismissed the other maids and said, “Please bear with me assisting you at least.”

“I still find such an activity embarrassing,” she mumbled, but undressed in front of Annie because she knew Luca probably ordered her to help and didn’t want to get her in trouble.

She immediately regretted her decision—her body was not something others should lay eyes on. In the place of underwear, she wore a thin slip under her dress that reached past her knees, but it wasn’t thick enough to hide the gruesome flower blooming on her chest.

“Aah!” She swiftly snatched her dress back and held it over her chest. She glanced at Annie to garner her reaction.

“Is something the matter, Lady Yuki?” Annie smiled and held out a silk nightgown.

...Did she see? But...

Yuki intently stared at Annie’s face for signs of disgust. Annie looked back at her perplexed as to why she didn’t take the nightgown.

“No...nothing...is wrong...”

Thank goodness. It doesn’t seem like she saw.

Yuki ingeniously found a way to hide her chest while changing without arousing Annie's suspicion. Annie quickly moved about the room, cleaning up Yuki's clothes and saying she would pick out her outfit for the morrow. After asking several questions, she learned Yuki hadn't eaten yet and had a light meal prepared for her. Yuki sat on the plush sofa in the guest room and watched food being prepared on the table in front of her as she absently thought about the events of the day.

I'm exhausted... The taut string of tension keeping her going had been cleanly sliced and the remaining relief and fatigue left her thoroughly drained. *A lot happened today... I saw Vivi for the first time in months...and I finally reunited with Luca.*

A whiff of the savory, warm soup stirred her stomach. *How strange... I was the one serving soup all this time and now I'm being served.*

During their travels through Rvydom and Fol, Yuki had served others at all times. Just like how she was currently stricken with fatigue and unable to serve herself, she brought food to those too sick to move.

Together with Selena and Vigo— Suddenly, she remembered the woman with light-purple hair and amber eyes.

"Selena!" she shouted.

"Are you all right, Lady Yuki?!" Annie asked, looking over at her where she sat quietly in a daze on the sofa. Yuki sat up straight and blinked repeatedly.

"I need to see Selena, Vigo, and Rhad! I need to tell them Luca woke up!"

How could she have forgotten to tell them? She wanted to curse herself for her stupidity.

"Lady Yuki, it is very late right now. Can you save it for tomorrow?"

"That might be the better choice, but I can't help worrying they are waiting for the news on pins and needles..."

They came to Adolunde to see Luca. Yuki succeeded in accomplishing her goal, so she needed to let them know immediately. She hopped to her feet and strode over to the door with the biggest strides her small legs could make. The

door opened automatically when she was only steps away.

“Luca.”

Luca stood in the doorway with a soft fur blanket wrapped around his broad shoulders. Water dripped from the tips of his wet, golden hair. Bathing had washed away the remaining scabs leaving him looking too healthy to be someone who had been dying of the Ten Day Fever that very afternoon. Luca looked into Yuki’s eyes and turned to Annie for an explanation.

“Lady Yuki is saying she is going to inform her friends of the good news you have woken up...”

“Can I go?”

Luca looked at the baffled Annie, unsure of what to do with her charge. “I’ve already contacted Ain. He should be here soon.”

“Ah...Ain...”

I forgot all about Ain. She apologized mentally for forgetting him and shook her head.

“Not Ain. I need to see the people who traveled with me from Rvydom.”

“The people you call Selena and Vigo?”

“Yes! I had them wait for me at Rhad’s manor.”

Luca’s right eyebrow twitched. His trademark expressionless mask was unchanging aside from that one tell. She wasn’t sure what his reaction meant.

“...Luca?”

“All right. I will send word to them to come here first thing in the morning,” he said and angled his chin toward where Annie waited at the table with a tray of food. “Annie’s soup is delicious.” He lightly tapped her on the head and walked to the table.

“...Okay.” Yuki turned from the door and sat on the sofa opposite of him.

Smiling, Annie continued preparing the meal. Before all the dishes were ready, Luca reached for the soup and began drinking from the side of the bowl.

“Prince Luca, you have poor manners. Are you incapable of waiting just a little

longer? Can't you at least use a spoon?" Annie berated him and placed a plate of mountain vegetables on his tray.

In Aridol, there was a specific order to which dishes were carried to the table. The order wasn't strictly adhered to on informal occasions, but Luca was royalty. Annie precisely stuck to the order. Pouring the drinks last was customary. Proper manners dictated no one was to begin eating until all dishes had been organized on the table.

"I haven't eaten in months. Telling me to wait is the same as torture," Luca said and signaled Yuki to start eating with him. Annie hadn't filled Yuki's glass with water yet.

"...Thank you for the food." Yuki timidly reached for the spoon and her bowl of soup. Annie stared at her in disbelief and smiled broadly at Luca.

"Good grief. Ever the rebel. Is this why you refused to completely dry your hair?"

"...?"

"Scoop me another bowl of soup, Annie," Luca requested with a neutral expression, ignoring Annie's giggles. Yuki wasn't sure what was so funny.

AIN arrived just as Yuki thrust her spoon into the dessert mousse.

"Prince Luca! Is it true Prince Luca woke up?!" Ain's shout and a loud crash sounded as the door to the guest room was flung open. Everyone inside looked at the door. Breathing heavily and clinging to the doorway with a bright-red bump on his forehead was Ain. "Prince Lucaaaaaaaa!"

Tears filled his black eyes as he stumbled into the room like a zombie. His mouth fell open the moment he noticed Yuki sitting across from Luca. "Yuuuki! W-Wait? What? Why?"

"Um, it's a long story..."

"No, not that part! Not that!" Ain ran over to her like a crazy person and gawked. "I saw you just the other day... Why did I chase you away so cruelly?"

"What?"

“Yuki, you were brought into the Capital’s orphanage a little while ago, right? I was on rounds with Gys and.... But you were executed before my very eyes. But you are here in front of me now. The woman I met was definitely you as well.... Huuuh?! I don’t understand!” Ain rambled, completely baffled.

“A-Ain...?”

“To begin with, why did you look like a teenager, Yuki? I understand now that was you, but why didn’t I know it at the time?! What in the three countries is going on here?!” Ain was talking in circles and not sticking to one point.

“Wait, are you saying you remember meeting me in my older form?” Yuki asked him.

“Of course I remember! I just did not realize it was you at the time, Yuki. Had I realized it, I would have never treated you like a nuisance. I am sooo sorry. A lot was going on at the time and I didn’t have it in me to be calm...”

“...What’s going on?”

Undeniably, her teenage body had vestiges of her younger self. But it was also unmistakably another person to anyone who knew her. Yet for some reason, Ain now associated the Yuki from the orphanage as Yuki.

“That is what I want to know!”

“There’s a high chance the Witch cast the spell so this would happen,” Luca surmised.

“Vivi did?”

“No other explanation for it. Ain.”

“Y-Yes, sir?!” Ain lifted his head from where he had sunk down on the floor at Yuki’s feet.

“I put you through a lot these last few months.”

“N-Not at all! It is preposterous for you to have put me through anything!” He waved his hands frantically in front of his face to deny it. “I am truly overjoyed to see you awake, Prince Luca. I should be the one apologizing for not being of any assistance in your time of need...” He hung his head like a puppy left in the rain.

A-Ain...

As Yuki sympathized with the restless Ain, she heard a snorted laugh across from her.

“Don’t worry about it. Yuki is alive and well. Things are going to get busy. I’ll work you like a dog once they do.”

Ain’s head shot up and he looked at Luca with watery eyes. “Yes, sir!” he said, nodding repeatedly.

Luca nodded once and grabbed his fourth chocolate mousse of the evening.

Chapter 59

CANDLE flames flickered as Luca leaned into the high-back, leather chair in his office. Ain sat across from him, his expression grim.

“Sorry for calling you here at this hour,” Luca apologized.

“Please do not let that bother you.” Compared to earlier, Ain was the epitome of calm and collected.

“Tomorrow at noon we’ll depart from the capital and head to Rvydom. I’ll have the Knights informed first thing in the morning. They can have until noon to decide what they want to do.”

“Tomorrow? Do you not think that is too soon? It is a given the Knights will be in disarray. Can’t you at least give them a day to—”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have the time.”

“Hah...”

Yes, Luca was out of time. He lamented the months, days, and hours wasted away idly sleeping, but regrets wouldn’t make up for anything without action.

“Besides, I doubt there are many crazy Knights willing to throw away their kingdom to follow me.”

The faces of his men came to mind. Some followed his command despite not being in support of him, while others worshipped him like some sort of god of the battlefield and followed him blindly. Little time had passed for Luca, but months had gone by without them seeing their commander. Time had a way of changing how people felt and where they stood.

Especially in times of war.

Unfamiliar faces increased and familiar faces slipped away.

“...War isn’t a good thing,” he muttered.

The tear streaked face of the girl asking him why war happens replayed through his mind. Luca had been convinced she was nothing more than a child, but while he wasn't watching she had acquired knowledge and experience he could only guess at. Frequently, he caught her pensively lost in her thoughts.

"...It isn't. I resent war too," Ain whispered. "Prince Luca, I have something to discuss with you before we get to business."

Ain looked straight into Luca's eyes. The raven black depths of his eyes sent gooseflesh across Luca's skin.

Did something bad happen? The majority of incidents wouldn't surprise Luca too much, but the unusual grimness about Ain had him prepare himself mentally.

"What is it?"

"...Liberat has not returned."

Liberat—the once powerful noble family. In the war twenty years ago, the Liberat Family was annihilated and the remaining members were captured and forced to live in Maruk as feudal lords in some sort of sick game. To this day, Nasette and Tita still possessed that scarred last name.

"They were supposedly last spotted on the frontlines at the border.... Their whereabouts since have been shrouded in mystery.... Apparently, someone discovered corpses resembling them near Cele."

THE accumulation of stress, fatigue, and exhaustion coupled with the chaotic events of the day had Yuki falling asleep within seconds of her head hitting the pillow. A good sleep was a worthwhile use of her time as it removed her exhaustion and let her wake up feeling refreshed in a way she hadn't while looking like a teenager.

She slid out of bed and went to the bay window where a ray of sunlight seeped through the curtains. Moving the curtains aside, she cracked the window open. The sun had risen fairly high in the blue sky and filled the room with its warm rays. Fresh, chilly morning air blew inside. From her room, Yuki had a panoramic view of the flower gardens. Gardeners busied themselves

tending to roses and trimming perfectly shaped trees below.

Yuki sucked in the clean air. It filled her lungs and spread through her. She held her breath to let the cool air revitalize her before exhaling.

“...It starts from here.”

Everything was going to happen from here. They were heading to Rvydom. They were going there to tell the people they didn’t need to start another war to gain their independence. But what could they do aside from waging war? How could Rvydom regain its independence? Yuki didn’t have the answer.

“That’s why I have to find the answer from here.”

She slapped her cheeks and changed into the clean clothes left on the armoire for her. Last night Luca told her to come to the saloon when she woke up, so she washed her face and left her room. On the way, she came across a servant who showed her the way and had food prepared for her in the saloon.

“By the way, where are Luca and Ain?”

“They have plans to go somewhere and are handling the preparations for their journey,” a maid answered her, smiling as she stared at Yuki’s food.

“I see,” Yuki responded, putting the last piece of cake in her mouth. She had only eaten two meals at Luca’s mansion, but it appeared to be customary for a different dessert to be served at the end of every meal. Moreover—

“Lady Yuki, would you like another slice of cake?”

“Ah, no, thank you. One slice is enough for me...”

“Is it? There is still so much cake leftover though,” the maid said longingly, hungrily eyeing the almost whole cake but for one missing slice. From the look of things, the whole cake was meant for Yuki just like how Luca always had whole desserts to himself.

“Um, please eat the remainder with the rest of the staff.”

The face of every servant in the room lit up.

“Are you certain it is all right?! Not once in my seven years here has Prince Lucat ever offered us his desserts! You must be the goddess of kindness, Lady

Yuki!”

Uh, I don't think you can call this kindness. Luca is just greedy when it comes to sweets. Yuki forced a smile in reply. The saloon doorknob rattled and the door opened.

“Prince Lucat.” The maid curtsied, her delighted smile schooled by the serious mask of a royal servant. Luca nodded to her as she passed, his eyes following the cake as it left before he slowly looked to Yuki.

“You slept a long time,” he commented. Luca was armed and clad in leather armor and a cloak. “We’re leaving.”

“We are? Where to?”

“Rvydom.”

“Excuse me?” Yuki thought they were heading to the castle or Rhad’s manor next.

“We are departing for Rvydom,” Luca repeated.

“Wait. We’re leaving now?”

“Yeah. We’ll stop by Rhad’s manor first and depart from there.”

“Uh, okay...”

“Mei, tell the others to get their stuff together sooner rather than later.”

“As you command.” The maid named Mei curtsied again from the hallway.

Luca grabbed Yuki’s right hand.

“Wh-Why are we leaving so soon?”

“We’re short on time.”

Yuki’s heart throbbed. ...*Vivi.*

Luca twined his fingers with hers and walked. She tightened her lips and nodded.

VIVI’S explanation still didn’t clear Yuki’s doubts. Why did she suddenly talk about the world falling apart? Excitement over Luca waking up had overwritten

the nagging feeling she had at the time.

This world...is going to fall apart. Yuki absently pondered as she trailed behind Luca outside his mansion. A damper had been put on the liveliness she witnessed inside the capital the last time she was there with Luca, but it still thrived with people.

All of this is going to be destroyed?

The entire situation was too surreal. Knowledge told her what was happening in this world was like what would happen on Earth once all the oil and natural resources dried up. Despite knowing the chaos that would ensue once it's gone, humans continued to use them. In the depths of every person's heart they wrote it off as a problem that would eventually handle itself. No one knew when that eventuality would come or if extinguishing the life of the planet would come sooner.

Monsters will appear and volcanoes will erupt... What will happen if volcanoes become active?

Yuki recalled the news from a few years ago about some mountain in Japan becoming volcanically active, forcing the residents in the surrounding areas to be evacuated. She couldn't remember why though. Was it fear of the volcanic ash raining down on the villages? Or the mountain erupting and the lava reaching the distant towns?

She looked up at the golden hair swaying in front of her. Luca said they were in a hurry, but still matched her slower pace.

"Hey, Luca, what will happen if the volcanoes erupt?"

Luca looked over his shoulder at her as he continued walking. He slowed his pace until he fell in step beside her. "The last time a mountain erupted on the continent of Aridol is said to be almost absurdly long ago. So long ago it happened while the Hero Aridol was still alive."

"The Hero Aridol?"

"Among the legends of how this world began is one about the human who saved the world. This continent took the hero's name—Aridol—and the name of the three friends who saved the world with him became the names of the

three countries on Aridol.”

“What are they a legend for?”

“Legends say when the world was on the brink of destruction, Aridol and his three friends sealed away the dragon and banished the monsters plaguing the land.”

“Neat...I didn’t know there was a legend like that here.”

“It’s not much more than a fairytale. Written with the legend and biography of Aridol is the record of the mountains erupting.” Luca frowned. “When the mountains erupt they send out lava and poisonous gases. Anything that touches the lava melts and all who breathe the gases suffocate.... Gray snow that isn’t cold rains across the continent, making the water it contaminates undrinkable and the food inedible. The water and air will become toxic and monsters will run rampant—it can only mean the end for us.”

Yuki stopped. Luca stopped several steps ahead and looked back.

“How can that happen?”

She sharply inhaled thinking of the unimaginable tragedy awaiting them. Chills ran along her spine and caused her to shudder just thinking about those things happening to this world. Yuki finally developed some understanding of the weight behind the game Vivi carelessly challenged her to. What had Vivi been doing all this time to keep the world from falling apart?

“...What should I do to stop that from happening?” she muttered.

Yuki didn’t know what she needed to do, but her panic mounted when she thought she had to do something and felt the weight of it increasing on her shoulders. The weight of what she had been challenged to dragged her back into the dark depths of depression and despair. If it successfully captured her, she wouldn’t be able to take action anymore. Scared to death, her feet rooted to the ground. She lifted her head to find the golden locks of sunlight to save her from the recesses of darkness.

Luca stared emotionlessly off into the distance. “I don’t know how long that Witch has been alive for, but she has kept the world in order until now. And the world has existed throughout her time without falling apart. Do you know what

her actions reveal?”

Yuki shook her head. She didn’t know what Luca was getting at. What had Vivi been doing all this time? What did Yuki stop her from doing? Yuki had interacted with Vivi far more than Luca, but she was clueless about what went through the Witch’s mind.

“What it reveals about this world,” Luca supplied for her. “A massive change has fractured the world as we know it over the past few decades. You’ve heard of it, haven’t you?”

“Yeah. Rvydom losing its right to be a country, right?”

“Correct. I’m also in the dark as to what the Witch has been doing. But the more you look at the state of things the easier it becomes to see the answer.... Trivial things can’t move the world as a whole. The loss of Rvydom is the greatest change in the last few decades. Since its inception, Aridol has been made up of three separate countries. War came, changing the balance with the loss of Rvydom as a country. And then the Legendary Witch no one had ever seen and everyone doubted was even real—appeared. In other words, the answer is to right the change and return things to how they should be.”

“Are you saying we just have to bring Rvydom back?”

Luca moved his gaze from the sky to Yuki. One corner of his lip curled up in a lopsided smile and he walked off. Yuki rushed after him. Another nagging feeling hit her: why did Luca know Vivi had been keeping the world’s equilibrium?

Luca didn’t wake up until after that conversation...

She stared at his back—the back of a man whose thoughts she could never read.

“...Hey, Luca, at what point did you actually wake up?”

He turned toward her, sending his golden hair swaying. With a devious smile he replied, “Around the time a certain someone started crying. Tears or snot dripped on my face. The cold drops woke me up.”

“It was cold...?”

Despite promising herself not to cry anymore, she had broken down crying on many occasions. But the only time she had ever cried in front of Luca was once Shae left and before Vivi appeared.

“That means you were awake since before Vivi showed up!” Luca lifted only one corner of his lip as he turned around and quickly walked down the road. “Hey!”

Yuki ran up to him and punched him in the back, but her fist slammed into the armor hidden behind his cloak. Sharp pain reddened her knuckles and she crouched on the ground. He stopped to laugh at her. Teary-eyed, she held her tingling fist to her chest. She was on the verge of tears not only from the pain in her right hand, but an immense sense of relief.

The terrible burden on her shoulders lightened immensely.

Chapter 60

WITH the sun high in the sky, the cool, gentle early autumn breeze felt nice on Yuki's cheeks warmed by too much walking. Things were strangely chaotic when Luca and Yuki arrived in front of Rhad's manor. Three horses were tied to the gate out front and luggage was strewn about the manicured lawn.

Spotting Selena amid the luggage, Yuki ran past Luca and shouted, "Selena!"

Hearing her name, Selena turned around. Her mouth fell open when she saw little Yuki running toward her. "Yuki?"

Oh yeah, I forgot. Realizing she was no longer sixteen, but ten in appearance, she mulled over how to explain herself. *But Vivi seems to have cast a spell to allow others to notice I'm the same person...*

Yuki came to a stop directly in front of Selena and hesitated about how to proceed, when Selena put her arms under her armpits and lifted her into the air like a mother playing airplane with her young daughter.

"Whoa!"

"You. Are. TOO. CUTE! Yuki, you're so tiny! Aaaah, tiny Yuki is so precious I'm going to have a nosebleed!" Selena brought Yuki down to her chest and hugged her, crushing her head against her bosom. "Do you feel better now? Seeing as you ran over here without tripping or looking like death, I'd assume you're okay, but I need to check."

Selena pulled Yuki back from her chest and held her at a level she could check over her face.

"I'm better now," Yuki said with a smile.

"Oh my," Selena muttered, suddenly turning serious. "Your eyes are violet, Yuki. Why didn't I notice until now?" She carefully put Yuki on the ground and cocked her head, sending her hair cascading over her shoulder. "The Yuki I know had a more developed, taller body...and your eyes looked black at the

time. But now I understand the real Yuki is small and has violet eyes.”

“S-Selena?”

“Had I known your eyes were violet things would’ve been settled much sooner. Why couldn’t I tell they were violet?” Selena rambled on. Noticing Yuki’s curious eyes on her, she grinned and stroked Yuki’s short hair. “Well, I’ll leave the heavy thinking to Vigo. I’ve got something much more *important* to do right now!”

“Geh!” Yuki squeaked as her face was buried in Selena’s stomach.

“I am so terribly, extremely, utterly relieved you are feeling better! Aww, sheesh, I was losing my mind thinking something might happen to you, Yuki! It was only worsened when you never came back! And then that worthless man came back in the middle of the night. What do you think he said when I asked about you?! ‘I fell asleep.’ What the heck kind of sick joke is that? And to make matters even worse, he dared to say he didn’t know what happened to you! Can you believe it?!”

Squeezed tight enough she heard her ribs pop, Yuki desperately smacked Selena on the back with her freed hand to let go of her.

“And then there’s this morning. The most handsome man in the world showed up out of nowhere to see us! Just when I was wondering who he could be, he declares he’s Yuki’s Knight! I was all smiles from there. He told me the good news of you being safe and sound and said he’d go to Rvydom without us telling him anything. Oh! I can totally understand why you were so desperate to see him again! Just one conversation with him and I was entranced!”

The most handsome man in the world was walking up behind them—Yuki wanted to tell Selena, but she was suffocating.

“Why don’t you let her go now? Yuki is suffocating. Plus, the most handsome man in the world is watching you kill his Master.”

Yuki had seen him yesterday, but the voice sounded nostalgic to her ears after all she had been through. Selena loosened her grip, allowing Yuki to suck in air.

“Vigo!” Yuki looked at Vigo standing behind Selena like he was sent from the heavens to save her. Surprise flickered across his face when he saw her, but was

quickly replaced by exasperation as he turned to load the horses.

“Are you ready to leave?” Luca asked Vigo, speaking formally.

“Once we get the luggage on the horses we’re ready to go.”

“Is that so? My soldiers will be ready to leave soon, so I came to pick you up.”

“I feel so special a handsome prince went out of his way to directly pick us up,” Selena said, releasing Yuki and handing her the jute bag she had left at Rhad’s. “Here you go, Yuki. I want to revel in our heartwarming reunion a little longer, but we need to rush.”

“Th-Thanks.” Yuki hugged the bag to her chest.

Selena smiled at her and returned to packing the remaining saddlebags with supplies. From the first time they traveled together, Yuki realized Selena and Vigo traveled light and were fast at packing up and leaving. They quickly packed their bags and mounted their horses.

“We’re riding too,” Luca said to Yuki.

“We are?”

“That’s my horse.”

The remaining horse next to Vigo and Selena was a gorgeous black warhorse.

“I thought that was Rhad’s horse.”

“I won’t be going.” Rhad came out of his manor and walked toward them. “I came to see you off. It looks like I have impeccable timing.” Rhad bowed to Luca.

“Why aren’t you coming, Rhad? Are you coming later then?” Yuki asked, rushing over to Rhad. Luca’s horse neighed.

Rhad knelt on one knee before her and shook his head. “I cannot accompany you,” he said in his sweet, baritone voice, setting her heart aflutter. Rhad looked fondly at Yuki and bowed his head to her. “Lady Yuki, please forgive my many indiscretions toward you.”

“Indiscretions? I’ve never thought you’ve acted inappropriately. Tell me why you can’t come.”

“...You see, I am Prince Luca’s advisor and servant. However, I am his advisor because he is royalty and I—the Mende Family—has served Adolunde’s royal family for generations. I cannot accompany you for that exact reason.”

“...I don’t get it.”

“To sum it up for you, while I am Prince Luca’s advisor I am also Prince Orga’s advisor. Since Prince Luca is going to throw away his title and country, he ceases to be the master I must serve.”

“...Excuse me?”

Luca is throwing away his title and country?

“The Mende Family planned to support Prince Luca as long as he was going to fight Prince Orga as another prince. However, if Prince Luca is going to disappear and throw away his name, then we have no reason to take his side. Such is the existence of a noble. Have you come to despise me, m’lady?”

In other words, Luca is throwing away Adolunde. By throwing away Adolunde, the nobles have lost interest in him. Is that what Rhad is trying to tell me?

“I am the next head of the Mende Family. In order to protect the family, the people who serve us, and our title—I cannot join you.” Rhad’s ashen eyes watched Yuki for a reaction.

“...I don’t think this would happen, but...if Adolunde and Maruk joined forces and turned against Rvydom...”

“Naturally, I would turn my blade and soldiers against you and Prince Luca.”

Rhad had a lot to consider in making his choice. He had worried after Luca’s health and did as much as he could to save him. From what Yuki could see during their time together, Rhad cared deeply for Luca.

But at the same time, he had a family and servants to look after and made the choice to protect them over his feelings for a friend. How could Yuki despise and blame him for his choice? Seeing the determination and lack of any hesitation in his ash-gray eyes kept her from begging him to join them. His determination to protect his family was such that Yuki could do nothing to change it.

“...I understand.”

Rhad bowed his head to her and didn't raise it. Yuki turned on her heel and left for Luca. He had already mounted his horse. He must have known Rhad's decision beforehand. With an unreadable face, he grabbed Yuki's hand and pulled her up on the horse in front of him, neatly tucking her between his arms. He picked up the reins and kicked the horse into a trot. Yuki glanced back at Rhad who remained unmoving with his head bowed to them as he knelt.



“...Are you okay with this, Luca?”

Luca spent more time with Rhad than Yuki, but he was unfazed by his decision.

“Yeah.”

...Really? He was throwing away his country and title. *Is that because of me?*

Had Luca never met Yuki, he would have lived his whole life without getting involved with Rvydom. By saving Yuki, he caught the Ten Day Fever and had to throw away his country.

“I’m sorry.”

Apologizing was about the only thing she could do. She could never tell him not to go to Rvydom.

I’m the worst.

“...For what?”

Yuki was shocked she said her apology aloud and fumbled for an explanation. “Eh? Um...well, for not stopping Rhad.”

“No one can stop him once he makes up his mind.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. His family has a long history. And he’s the sole heir.”

The way he made it sound like Rhad’s choice was inevitable pierced her heart. The aching sensation spread when she thought about how Luca must have wanted him to come, but didn’t say anything out of respect for his decision.

“This is the start of a new adventure, isn’t it, Luca?”

Luca smirked down at her. “No, it is the start of a new game!” with a shout he kicked his horse into motion, and the group sped off down the road away from Adolunde once more.

The Violet Knight Volume 2—End.

Side Story 1: Rifae and Est

RIFAENOTIS was not a morning person. Staying up late at night had something to do with it, but the primary issue was his terribly low blood pressure.

The day after he found the boy and brought him to his house, the morning sunlight shined brightly through his windows, and Rifaenotis struggled to keep the blankets over his head.

Let me sleep just a little longer...

Sleep was a sweet temptation, and with no reason to resist, Rifaenotis flipped over in bed, putting his back to the window. With each breath he took, he fell deeper into the folds of sleep.

CRASH! It sounded like something broke. The sound of destruction came from within his house.

Where did that come from? Why is there sound coming from my house? Aaah, now that I think about it, I picked up a boy last night and let him sleep here. Then the boy is the source... Rifaenotis sleepily concluded, and shot out of bed like he had been electrocuted. *Is the boy all right?*

Rifaenotis jumped out of bed and fell because in his haste he had forgotten to attach his fake leg. He frantically fumbled around for the wooden leg with eyes straining against the blinding morning sunlight. He grabbed the leg, attached it quickly, and dashed out of the room ignoring the slight wobble. The sounds were coming from the living room.

“What’s going on here?!”

He threw the door open and spotted the boy—Est—sitting on his rump. He stared blankly at the avalanche of junk sliding from the kitchen into the living room. As soon as he noticed Rifaenotis, he sharply glared at him.

“Why is it so filthy here?!”

“...Pardon me?”

Est dusted his clothes as he got to his feet. Dust floated in the air and he coughed.

“I asked you why the kitchen is so filthy!”

“...Hah.”

Eyes turned watery from too much coughing, he rubbed them and glared up at Rifaenotis. “You were still asleep so I thought I could make you breakfast as thanks for a night’s lodging and meal, but there’s nowhere to even cook in here! What do you normally eat? Where do you eat?!”

“Eh? Oh, dried meat, dried fruit, and the like.”

“That doesn’t make a meal!”

Est was so small yet his intensity packed a powerful punch. Rifaenotis was dumbfounded.

“Listen up, okay? Food is the source of life. You talk weird because you don’t eat right!”

“No, I’ve always talked this way, hon—”

“Zip it! Anyway, I’ll clean up and cook, so wait till I’m finished!” Est said, going through the room without permission and pulling out cleaning equipment Rifaenotis didn’t even know he had. Est set about cleaning as if he forgot Rifaenotis existed.

“Damn it! Even the broom is covered in filth! It was too dark yesterday to tell, but this place is a pigsty! It’s such a pigsty! The pure definition of one! Do humans even live here? Where are the pigs?!”

“I—”

Est spoke over Rifaenotis, “You’re a pervert! You don’t count as human!”

Pervert...

Rifaenotis could only wordlessly watch as Est promptly cleaned the living room and kitchen.

“...I didn’t even ask you to clean or cook for me,” he mumbled to himself.

Side Story 2: Selena and Vigo

LAUGHTER from four distinct voices filled the log cabin.

“...Is it really okay to do this?” Yuki asked.

“It’s okay! Totally okay! He won’t remember a thing once he wakes up in the morning anyway,” Selena nonchalantly answered.

“Still... Is it okay to put him in Selena’s clothes? Isn’t this the same as throwing your clothes away?”

“Hmm, if it comes to that I’ll have the prince buy me a new outfit.”

“Ooh, let me in on that too, sweetie. My favorite outfit turned to charcoal during my last experiment,” Rifae interjected.

“Rifae, you deserve roasted clothes after the nightmare of an experiment I had to pick up after,” Est complained.

Only one person in the room wasn’t talking—the dead drunk Vigo.

“Oi, what in Aridol is going on over here?”

“Ew. Don’t show me that area!”

“Yeah! Please don’t stain our pure maiden hearts!”

“You’re no maiden, Selena.”

“Heh, women wear complicated clothing.”

“Hey, are you done yet?”

“Not yet. Selena, do you have any makeup with you?”

“Of course!”

“But is it seriously okay to do this? He won’t die right?” Est asked.

“He’s fine. He’s breathing.”

“He is? Oh, you’re right—ew, he smells! He reeks of alcohol!”

“Forget if he’s breathing or not and help me out here! Don’t make a weak girl

do something like this,” Rifae grumbled.

“Who’s weak?”

“Who’s a girl?”

“...Did you two say something?”

“...You’re hearing things.”

“Hey, can I look yet?” Yuki asked.

“You can.”

Selena burst into the loudest laughter yet. “Sweet little Vigo...you’re so cute in a dress! Puahaha!”

This is the story of how Vigo’s weakness to alcohol has gotten him into a lot of trouble for most of his life. Good thing he has great friends looking out for him!

Side Story 3: Tita and Nasette

TITA'S mind snapped into awareness like a buoy breaking the surface after rising from the depths of the deep, dark ocean. The moment her consciousness returned, she was assaulted by the feeling of being soaked in sweat. Her eyebrows knitted from the nausea and headache.

“Ngh...”

Gradually she was capable of acknowledging there was sunlight beyond her eyelids, but it felt blinding against her closed eyes.

It's morning...?

Partially cracking her eyes let in the painfully bright sunlight. From her neck to her spine, every piece of her body felt exhausted.

“...!”

She heard someone's voice. Her dazed mind still hadn't shaken off the side effects of being unconscious. She couldn't recognize what sounds the voice was making.

It took some time for her to finally realize the voice was calling her name.

NASETTE was crying. Dazed, Tita lay limply in his arms as he hugged her.

Why are you crying? She couldn't process what was going on. Nasette squeezed her against him so tight she frowned.

“Brother....”

Why are you crying? The rest of her question was squeezed out of her by an overexcited Nasette.

“Thank goodness! I'm so glad!” he shouted in a nasally voice. He instantly pulled back from her and put his large hands on her cheeks. “What a relief. The red splotches are coming off.”

Red splotches? Tita dropped her eyes to her hands. Brownish-red scabs on the verge of ripping off covered her skin.

Oh, that's right, I—

It was then Tita finally remembered she had collapsed with the Ten Day Fever and had no memory since.

“FOR crying out loud! Brother, you are hovering too much!” Tita glowered at Nasette as he paced in circles around her bed.

“Ah, but you only just got better. Isn't there anything I can help you with?”

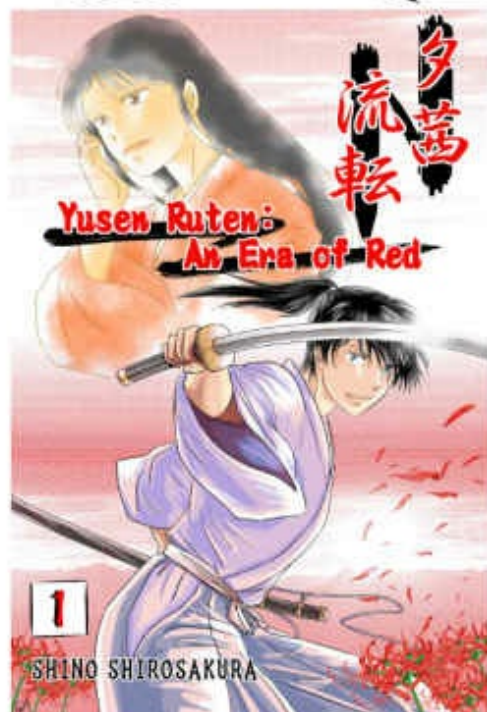
Tita put down her knitting and flattened her lips. “There's nothing I need your help with right now! Good grief, I heard from Father, you know? He said you restlessly stayed by my side the entire time that even the doctor mistook you for my husband.”

Nasette embarrassedly scratched his head.

“...Stupid Nasette! Why don't you go outside?! I'm going to sleep!” she shouted and yanked the blankets over her head, sending her knitting clattering on the floor.



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